

The Diabetes Epidemic

The disease's explosive growth has public-health experts concerned.

Question: My blood-sugar level is above normal and my doctor says I could develop diabetes. I started exercising and watching my diet. Are there natural means to help lower blood sugar?

C.C., Kalamazoo, Michigan

Answer: More than 2,500 new cases of Type 2 Diabetes (the noninsulin-dependent kind that usually develops in adulthood) are diagnosed every day. That's a stunning statistic. This explosive growth is causing public-health experts to call diabetes a "national epidemic."

But there are things you can do to fight this disease in addition to exercising and eating properly. One of the most effective ways is to adopt a program of natural supplements that includes the right balance of vitamins, minerals, herbs and fiber.

One herb deserves special attention—gymnema, a bushy plant that grows in India. It has been used for centuries to help treat problems associated with diabetes, though science has just recently recognized its effectiveness.

During the last 10 years, several important studies have been conducted examining the effects of this herb. In one, 27 insulin-dependent diabetics were put on 400 mg (milligrams) of a gymnema extract. After 10 to 12 months the participants were managing their blood glucose much better. Many were able to lower their insulin requirements.

In another, 22 noninsulin-dependent diabetics also were given 400 mg of a gymnema extract. During the next 18 to 20 months they experienced significant decreases in blood-glucose levels and “glycosylated hemoglobin”—an important indicator of blood-sugar control.

These improvements allowed many in the study to take less of the drugs they were on for lowering blood sugar. Five of the 22 were able to discontinue their medications altogether.

Researchers are not yet clear how gymnema exerts its beneficial effects—aside from its capability to block the absorption of sugar. One animal study, however, has given us a tantalizing clue.

In this experiment, researchers observed a doubling in the number of insulin-producing cells of the pancreas in rats treated with gymnema. This is an astounding result, as no other substance is known to regenerate pancreatic cells after they cease to function.

Along with other herbs, such as bitter melon, bilberry, silymarin and aloe vera—and the proper combination of vitamins, minerals and fiber—gymnema is just one part of a balanced nutritional program to help fight Type 2 Diabetes, the natural way.

Question: I know that eating a lot of fiber can be beneficial to my health in many ways. But aren't fiber-rich foods high in calories, and won't I gain weight if I eat more fiber?

S.B., Ocala, Florida

Answer: It's a common belief that high-fiber foods such as

beans, peas, lentils, fresh fruit and vegetables are also high-calorie foods. But that just isn't so.

In fact, they are actually lower in calories than most other foods because they're practically fat-free. It's only when high-fiber foods are mixed with fats and other foods, or eaten in large quantities, that they provide large amounts of calories.

A high-fiber diet has already been linked to preventing heart disease and cancer, and according to another study it may also fight obesity. The study, presented by the American Medical Association, found that young adults who ate at least 21 grams of fiber per day gained, on average, eight pounds less over a 10-year period than those who ate the least amount of fiber.

Fiber consumption also seemed to provide a more accurate gauge than fat consumption when predicting weight gain, blood-cholesterol levels and other risks for cardiovascular disease.

Why is fiber beneficial? Fiber slows the rate of nutrient absorption after a meal, reducing the rise of blood-sugar levels and insulin secretion. A high blood-insulin level has been associated with a risk for cardiovascular disease as well as Type 2 Diabetes.

So don't skimp on fiber. Federal guidelines recommend 20 grams to 25 grams per day.