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4 strategies to stop blood sugar swings and avoid that afternoon crash

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Unless you have diabetes, you probably don't give much thought to how your blood sugar changes throughout the day. You'd be wise to pay more attention: While some fluctuation is normal, many people experience major spikes and dips, which can sap your energy, [derail your focus](#), and lead to weight gain, says Grace Derocha, MBA, RDN, CDCES, a nutritionist and spokesperson for the [Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics](#) who specializes in workplace wellness.

Perhaps even more concerning is the fact that high glucose variability—meaning you have a significant gap between your highs and lows—has been tied to an [increased risk of insulin resistance](#), or the inability to use insulin efficiently, which often paves the way for [type 2 diabetes](#). Wide glucose variability may also increase your odds of having heart attack or stroke, according to a 2020 study published in [Cardiovascular Diabetology](#).

How to get off the rollercoaster? For otherwise healthy people (who don't have diabetes), it largely comes down to making some key lifestyle changes, starting with what you eat. These four smart strategies can help even out your blood sugar so you feel better and stay healthier.

1. Watch out for surprising sources of sugar

You likely know that candy, pastries, and heavily-sweetened drinks (including soft drinks and various coffee concoctions) can all send your blood sugar soaring. But anything carb-heavy, even if it doesn't contain added sugar or taste sweet, has the potential to cause a similar effect. Watch out for refined (white) breads and highly processed cereals, which are easy to overdo.

Bottled salad dressings and condiments like ketchup and barbecue sauce also often pack a surprising amount of added sugar, as do many plant-based milk alternatives. Be sure to read labels, and pick accordingly—especially if you tend to drown your salad and like your coffee extra light, warns Derocha.

Fruit is another potential offender, especially if you choose the dried variety or super-size your servings. "One of those little boxes of raisins is probably equal to 15-20 regular grapes" as far as (natural) sugar content is concerned, says Derocha.

Whole fruit is generally a better bet, but that doesn't mean you should eat unlimited amounts when it comes to higher-sugar options like grapes, bananas, watermelon, and mango. "People think, 'It's fruit and it's healthy for me, because it has a lot of fiber and vitamins,' and that's true," she says. "But I had a patient that used to freeze grapes and eat the whole bag."

2. Eat fiber first

It might sound gimmicky, but there's good evidence that simply changing the order in which you eat your food makes a big difference in terms of the impact it has on your blood sugar, says Jessie Inchauspé, a biochemist who studies the effect of food on health. Even if you don't change the components of a meal—say, pasta, chicken, and vegetables—eating the vegetables first, followed by the protein and finally the carbs—can cut the resulting glucose spike substantially.

"We often talk about what to eat or not eat, but this is about *how*," she explains, echoing advice shared in her new book, *Glucose Revolution*, and on her popular [Instagram](#) page. She points to several studies, including a 2018 research from the [Journal of Nutritional Science and Vitaminology](#) in which subjects were instructed to eat the same meal of rice, vegetables, and meat after an overnight fast on different days; when eating rice last, glucose and insulin levels were significantly lower 30 minutes after the meal than they were when they ate the rice first.

Fiber, Inchauspé explains, coats the upper intestines and creates a mesh that prevents the body from absorbing too much glucose from the rest of the meal. Protein and fat also help slow movement of food through the gastrointestinal tract, so by the time the carbohydrates enter the body they don't flood the bloodstream with glucose as dramatically.

For bonus points, she advocates starting meals with an additional vegetable dish, such as a salad, and drizzling on some vinegar: "It can curb a glucose spike from a subsequent meal by up to 30%, because the acetic acid in the vinegar slows the breakdown of starches into glucose," she says. "It also goes into the muscles and tells them to soak up more glucose" from the bloodstream.

"I was actually shocked when I learned this about vinegar," she says, but "[clinical trials](#) have shown how it can impact your health from a glucose perspective."

3. Be carb-consistent throughout the day

Going low-carb at breakfast and lunch for the express purpose of splurging at dinner doesn't work if your goal is to keep your blood sugar steady. "You can't bank carbs," says Derocha. The best way to keep your blood sugar on an even keel is to have a similar amount of carbohydrates during each of your three meals (or, if you prefer, five mini meals).

On a similar note, while a sweet treat might seem most appealing mid-afternoon or late at night, the best time to give into that ice cream or cookie craving is actually right after you've finished eating a meal that contains some protein, fat, and fiber. Not only will you eat less of the treat, but the other nutrients you just consumed will help blunt the impact on your blood glucose level and the impact won't be as great as if you indulged on an empty stomach. For the same reason, consider starting your day with a savory (rather than sweet) breakfast, says Inchauspé.

4. Move after meals

To avoid a major post-meal blood sugar spike, resist the urge to lounge on the couch after dinner. Instead, do something moderately active for at least 10 minutes, says Inchauspé. The goal is to activate your muscles so they'll seek out glucose from your bloodstream and utilize it rather than letting it linger there.

Indeed, numerous studies support the importance of moving after meals, including a 2021 meta-analysis published in the journal [Sports Medicine](#); the authors concluded that 30 minutes of aerobic activity in the postprandial state is ideal for decreasing glucose and insulin levels in healthy adults. Derocha also points to [research](#) that found people with fasting blood sugar readings in the prediabetic range were able to modulate their high blood sugar simply by walking for 15-minutes three times a day (after each meal). "Even just cleaning up the dishes or folding laundry will provide some movement that helps lower blood sugar," she says.