Understanding and Resolving Hypoglycemia
by E Douglas Kihn, OMD, LAc

Hypoglycemia, referred to popularly as "low blood sugar", is a condition that is rampant in the U.S. and other areas of the planet that are influenced by the hurry and worry of modern Western culture. Every practitioner of Chinese medical science with any length of experience has treated many patients with this condition. Many practitioners themselves suffer from symptoms of hypoglycemia.

Hypoglycemia occurs when blood sugar levels drop below the normal range of 70 to 110 milligrams per deciliter of blood. The most common cause is drug-related, occurring when insulin-dependent diabetics overdose on insulin (which transfers blood sugar from the blood into the cells). Other causes are thought to be stomach surgery, tumors, and other problems, all of which either cause blockage of glucose (sugar) release from the liver or an overproduction of insulin. Non-drug-related hypoglycemia, unless caused by an operable tumor (rare), is considered incurable (The Merck Manual of Medical Information: Home Edition, 1997).

According to Merck, neither prolonged fasting nor strenuous exercise by themselves cause hypoglycemia. In spite of that, Western medicine and nutrition advise that hypoglycemics control their symptoms by eating small amounts of food throughout the day.

The common symptoms of hypoglycemia are the following: symptoms similar to those of an anxiety attack, such as sweating, nervousness, quivering, faintness, palpitations, and symptoms that reduce brain function, such as dizziness, confusion, fatigue, weakness, headaches, 'drunken behavior', visual abnormalities, seizures, and coma. (Merck, 1997)

This article will show that this advice:
- Contradicts the traditions of Chinese medical science,
- Ensures that the problem does not get resolved, and
- Leads to more serious health problems.

From the Chinese Perspective
According to CAM, these symptoms fit the pattern of liver yang rising with liver wind disturbing the qi and blood of the head. "Drastic emotional changes, overstrain and stress, and excessive alcoholic drinking... give rise to abrupt rising of yang. Subsequently the liver wind is produced." (Chinese Acupuncture and Moxibustion, 2004)

Practitioners will take note that in every non-drug-related case of hypoglycemia, strong evidence of excess internal heat (particularly liver heat) will be found. According to Chinese medical science as well as modern physics, heat is the result of movement. The reason: Simply put, movement creates friction, which in turn creates heat. Excess movement (overstrain) creates excess heat. Liver easily overheats, rising quickly and generating wind. Wind scatters and "confuses" the qi and blood of the head, leading to disturbances such as dizziness, faintness, visual abnormalities, headaches, confusion, and so on.

Since the 1980s, Americans have become among the most overworked people in the history of humanity. In the U.S., busyness is worshipped and promoted everywhere. Sleep and rest are vilified as laziness. Living life at a slow, relaxed pace is considered unproductive, even un-American. In addition, people worry themselves sick. The American penchant for worrying gives rise to anxiety and a continuous state of liver qi stagnation, with its consequent heat and wind problems. This high degree of liver qi stagnation adds to the buildup of internal heat in the liver and heart.

Heat is also produced by stagnation; in this case, liver qi stagnation produces the heat. According to CAM, "...mental depression, anger, and anxiety... produce obstruction of the liver qi which later turns into fire". As liver qi pounds against the barrier in an attempt to break through, the intense movement on the barrier causes friction, which leads to heat. Liver heat rises to the head, creating wind.

From the Western Perspective
Hurry and worry force the adrenal glands to secret epinephrine in abnormal quantities throughout the typical American day. Epinephrine, among other functions, stimulates insulin production so that ready fuel in the blood (glycogen or "blood sugar") is carried into the body's cells in preparation for fighting or fleeing. This continuous state of supposed emergency exhausts the supply of blood sugar stored in the muscles and liver, creating a temporary deficit. The lack of glycogen for the cells leads to hypoglycemic symptoms.

Conventional treatment is simply to advise the patient to frequently add fuel to the system (i.e. eat) in order to prevent blood sugar exhaustion or to control its symptoms. There is no recommendation in CAM or any other Chinese medical text, modern or ancient, that eating small amounts of food all day controls liver heat or liver wind. There are specific foods that have cooling properties and can be prescribed as a temporary measure in conjunction with herbal and acupuncture prescriptions and lifestyle changes. However, telling patients to eat small meals several times per day to control wind and heat would mean taking a complete departure from Chinese medical tradition.

The Maintenance of Hypoglycemia
Food is heavy. Most food contains a high degree of chemically bound water molecules. This yin sits down on top of the yang that wants to rise, keeping it suppressed for awhile. Small amounts of yin (food) are eaten throughout the waking period for intellectual reasons, i.e. to control hypoglycemia, rather than instinctive reasons, i.e. the hunger feeling (hunger being felt as an empty sensation in the upper abdomen). Since the body did not call for food, a situation of constant food stagnation is maintained. Food stagnation, like all types of stagnation, leads to heat, which contributes to the excess internal heat.
caused by hurrying and worrying, ensuring that the situation of hypoglycemia is kept alive. And, as with any palliative that is relied on too heavily, the relief provided discourages the self-examination and lifestyle changes required to eliminate this syndrome.

The Danger of Maintaining Hypoglycemia
The greatest danger from eating food to control the symptoms of hypoglycemia is that the constant and unrelenting call for insulin production and cellular reception of unwanted nutrition causes eventual exhaustion of the pancreas’s ability to produce insulin and decreases the cells’ ability to accept nutrition-bearing insulin. Thus, this advice has the potential to cause diabetes type 2. Diabetes type 2 (hypoglycemia) is a situation in which the body completely rejects food. When food is eaten in violation of the hunger instinct for a long period of time, a very common result (especially in the U.S.) is an excess damp condition in the middle jiao and a complete shutdown of the spleen’s ability to transform and transport, i.e. diabetes type 2. This process happens whether the patient is obese or not.

Another danger is the problem of excess weight/obesity, a problem which, like that of diabetes type 2, occurs in record numbers in the U.S. and which has been connected to a myriad of minor and major health problems.

Effective and Safe Heat Reduction
Chinese medicine offers many tools to reduce and eliminate internal heat and wind. Common points such as Du 14, LI 11, LI 4, Liv 3, Liv 8, H 7, and Du 20 can be quite effective when applied consistently. Jia Wei Xiao Yao San, either in raw, processed powder, or patent form, is excellent at regulating liver qi and clearing the heat that causes wind. Patients also need to be encouraged to avoid multi-tasking and rushing and instead learn to honor sleep, breaks, play, relaxation, all emotions, and their eating instincts. In addition, meditative exercises based on deep breathing such as tai chi or yoga, as well as the study of Taoist philosophy, are all very effective at eliminating and preventing the buildup of stagnation, heat, and wind and thereby resolving the condition known as hypoglycemia.

Dr. E Douglas Kihn graduated from Emperors College in 1986. Since then, he has been in private practice in West Los Angeles and teaching at area OM colleges. He is the author of “The Workbook of Chinese Herbs” and the soon-to-be published “Eating By Instinct: Your Guide To Reclaiming Your Lean Birthright”.

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