

Know your Blood Sugar

by Bruce Willey

Looking at her, it's hard to believe that Mary Toscano ever felt tired and unhealthy. But that's what the energetic 42-year-old former computer engineer says she used to feel like before she cut out the pretzels and started managing her blood sugar. Now, Toscano, a certified nutritionist and massage therapist, is a nutritional life force to be reckoned with. Over lunch—a plate of dhal, brown rice and a salad at Dharma's in Capitola—Toscano recalls a time when she woke up exhausted every morning and almost always suffered an energy crash in the afternoon.

"I was tired of my energy levels going up and down, up and down," Toscano says. "I was tired of feeling old."

Those days are over now that Toscano has made the connection between carbohydrates and blood sugar levels. In the process, she's made it her life mission to get the word out about what she's labeled her lectures and video, "Sweet Fire: Understanding Sugar's Role in Your Health."

With diabetes at epidemic levels, obesity topping the scales and heart disease at heart-stopping numbers, controlling blood sugar has come to the forefront of good health. Yet, for all the time and energy we spend eating, (after all, assuming you eat three meals a day, that's 1,095 times a year) you would think we would all be better at it—better at healthy eating that is.

"I think it's all about education and awareness," she says between bites of her food. "The problem is people are being educated by the media and the food companies."

Another problem, she says, is our bodies were not designed nor evolved to handle the amount of sugars we now consume. Since carbohydrates convert to simple sugars, a diet rich in carbs can spike blood sugar levels dramatically. Elevated blood sugar devastates the body, making a person sleepy, tired and in the long-term can lead to diabetes, skin problems, weakened immune system, weight gain and heart disease, to name a few. In addition a typical American diet is filled with foods that have been highly processed. The crackers, the French fries, the frozen dinners, the breakfast cereal may be easy to digest, but reach the blood stream more quickly. Toscano suggests eating whole foods when possible.

"The closer to real food the better," she says. "You don't have to read the label on real food because millions of years of nature have gone into making just the right nutrients that go well with your body. It's not exactly 'you are what you eat,' rather 'you are what you absorb.'"

In the "Sweet Fire" video, she demonstrates how much sugar we are ingesting and how to calculate the amount. Toscano holds up an innocuous glass of orange juice and computes the teaspoons of sugar by dividing by four. Because there are four grams of sugar per teaspoon, that works out to seven teaspoons of sugar, an amount that would make most people cringe at the thought of dumping that much sugar into their morning coffee.

Then it's on to the Raisin Bran (five teaspoons), apple juice (10 teaspoons), a glass of milk (one teaspoon) and so on until she arrives at the final meal, dinner. By the end of this imaginary day in the life of this imaginary diet, the food converted into sugars equals a whopping 70 teaspoons a day; or in other words, 216-pounds a year. And this example looks, at least before it was converted into sugar, like a relatively healthy diet. But as Toscano points out, this sugar intake is a huge jump from 100 years ago when Americans consumed just 70 pounds of sugar a year.

Of course, Toscano isn't suggesting we cut all carbohydrates out of our diet. In fact she thinks the



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Atkins Diet has gone too far, with its high-protein, low-carb emphasis.

"We've gone from high carb/ low fat to high fat/ low carb diets, and there will be repercussions from this," she says. "It's all about balance. We need sugar to live, but too much is going to wreak havoc on our system. The blood is a river of nutrients and energy and health, and like all rivers you can pollute it."

With that, Toscano puts her fork down, the complicated, yet wondrous process of "sweet fire" already under way.

Tips to Better Blood Sugar Control

•**Eat a wide variety of whole foods** Example: A raw apple is better than applesauce; applesauce is better than apple juice. The less processed the better.

•**Read the labels** Become aware and well informed by reading the labels, especially the carbohydrate index. Take grams of sugar and divide by four to get

the amount of sugar in teaspoons. (28g/4 = 7 tsp.) If you see the word "partially hydrogenated," put it back on the shelf.

•**Exercise** Both cardiovascular exercise and weight training get the blood flowing and help the muscles absorb more sugar.

•**Essential Fatty Acids** For those who don't get a lot of cold water fish in their diet, fish and flax oil (omega 3) is beneficial for healthy blood, circulation, joints and other advantages too numerous to mention. Additionally, raw nuts and seeds contain beneficial oils.

•**Fiberize** Whole, complex carbohydrate foods with fiber help time release the sugar more slowly into the blood for consistent and sustained energy. Legumes, beans and most vegetables are good examples of high fiber foods.

For more information on Mary Toscano's "Sweet Fire" visit www.marytoscano.com or 464-9623.