

# 1 Carbohydrates and insulin resistance in clinical nutrition: 2 recommendations from the ESPEN Expert Group

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37 Manuscript Endorsed by ESPEN Special Interest Group on Obesity

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46

47 **Abstract**

48 Growing evidence underscores the important role of glycemic control in health and recovery from illness.  
49 Carbohydrate ingestion in the diet or administration in nutritional support is mandatory, but carbohydrate intake  
50 can adversely affect major body organs and tissues if resulting plasma glucose becomes too high, too low, or highly  
51 variable. Plasma glucose control is especially important for patients with conditions such as diabetes or metabolic  
52 stress resulting from critical illness or surgery. These patients are particularly in need of glycemic management to  
53 help lessen glycemic variability and its negative health consequences when nutritional support is administered.  
54 Here we report on recent findings and emerging trends in the field based on an ESPEN workshop held in Venice,  
55 Italy, 8-9 November 2015. Evidence was discussed on pathophysiology, clinical impact, and nutritional  
56 recommendations for carbohydrate utilization and management in nutritional support. The main conclusions  
57 were: a) excess glucose and fructose availability may exacerbate metabolic complications in skeletal muscle,  
58 adipose tissue, and liver and can result in negative clinical impact; b) low-glycemic index and high-fiber diets,  
59 including specialty products for nutritional support, may provide metabolic and clinical benefits in individuals with  
60 obesity, insulin resistance, and diabetes; c) in acute conditions such as surgery and critical illness, insulin resistance  
61 and elevated circulating glucose levels have a negative impact on patient outcomes and should be prevented  
62 through nutritional and/or pharmacological intervention. In such acute settings, efforts should be implemented  
63 towards defining optimal plasma glucose targets, avoiding excessive plasma glucose variability, and optimizing  
64 glucose control relative to nutritional support.

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## 67 **1. Introduction: carbohydrates, insulin resistance, and clinical** 68 **nutrition**

69 Carbohydrates in the diet provide an essential metabolic fuel, commonly in the form of glucose. While necessary  
70 for life, excess or rapidly changing levels of glucose in the blood can lead to several health problems and contribute  
71 to the development of obesity, insulin resistance, and type 2 diabetes mellitus (T2D). Furthermore, poorly  
72 controlled glucose levels in critically ill patients or in those recovering from surgery can lead to glucose variability  
73 with hyper- and hypoglycemia, conditions that can impede recovery and can be fatal. In order to summarize recent  
74 research findings, share ideas, and discuss how emerging avenues of research may shape clinical nutrition  
75 recommendations and guidelines in the future, the authors of this manuscript participated in a workshop hosted  
76 by the European Society for Clinical Nutrition and Metabolism (ESPEN) on November 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> 2015, in Venice,  
77 Italy. In this manuscript about glucose and glycemic control in clinical nutrition, we report on key concepts from  
78 workshop presentations. This report was prepared from a first draft based on summaries provided by each  
79 speaker, professionally edited, and further reviewed and revised in multiple rounds by all Faculty members. In this  
80 summary paper, we review how major metabolic organs use glucose and regulate its levels within the body,  
81 explain conditions that disrupt glycemic control, and discuss dietary and clinical nutrition guidelines for the  
82 treatment of conditions that feature dysglycemia.

83 Common digestible carbohydrates are classified as monosaccharides (glucose, fructose, and galactose),  
84 disaccharides (sucrose, lactose), or polysaccharides (starches, glycogen), based upon chemical structure [1].  
85 Alternatively, carbohydrates are grouped based upon their digestibility and nutritional effect: the alpha bonds  
86 between glucose molecules in starch are easily broken down in digestion, whereas beta bonds in fibers are  
87 resistant to human digestive enzymes. Digestible carbohydrates break down and provide the body with  
88 monosaccharides for energy, while those that resist digestion are non-glycemic, but instead provide energy  
89 through fermentation in the colon by the gut microbiota. Carbohydrate quality and digestibility can influence post-  
90 prandial plasma glucose concentration and the inflammatory response, which is now known to underlie the  
91 development of insulin resistance, metabolic syndrome, and T2D [2]. Foods with high glycemic index (GI) and  
92 glycemic load (GL) are associated with increased risk of such diseases [3-5]. Conversely, lowering dietary GI and GL

93 can improve metabolic control [6-11]. Furthermore, increasing the protein-to-carbohydrate ratio can reduce  
94 glycemia [12], and inflammation can be tempered through dietary modification [13].

## 95 **2. Glucose metabolism in the organs**

96 Advances in research have shed light on the ways in which glucose interacts with a number of organ systems.  
97 Excess exposure of these organs to glucose as a result of hyperglycemia, as well as uncontrolled spiking of glucose  
98 levels after meals, can contribute to the deterioration of an individual's condition by causing metabolic  
99 derangements such as oxidative stress, tissue and systemic inflammation, and insulin resistance. This section  
100 summarizes the impact of glucose on major organs involved in substrate metabolism and utilization.

### 101 **Central Nervous System**

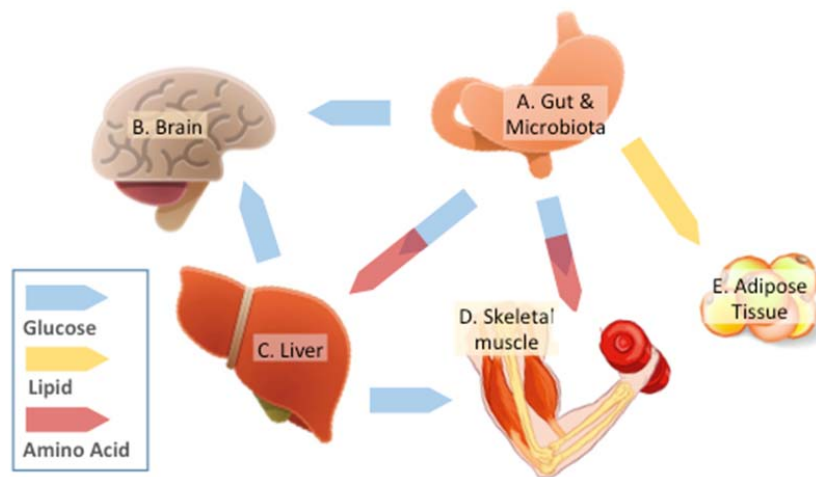
102 The relationship between glucose and the brain is important for the whole body. Glucose is the major physiological  
103 source of energy for the brain, and the brain senses glucose and carbohydrate levels throughout the body (Figure  
104 1A, B). The brain utilizes hormones to signal to other organs (Figure 1B-E), communicate glucose status, and  
105 influence whole-body glucose homeostasis [14-16]. The impaired glucose homeostasis that occurs in T2D may be  
106 caused in part by early defects in central nervous system glucose sensing mechanisms [16].

### 107 **Skeletal muscle**

108 Skeletal muscle is a major contributor to whole-body glucose utilization, as glucose is a relevant fuel for the  
109 maintenance of skeletal muscle energy homeostasis (Figure 1A, D). However, excess glucose exposure can lead to  
110 muscle damage [17], which in turn has health and clinical consequences for the individual. Mechanisms of glucose-  
111 induced tissue damage are complex and may vary in acute and chronic conditions. Common fundamental  
112 pathways causing muscle damage following exposure to excess glucose however include oxidative stress,  
113 inflammation, and insulin resistance, and it may alter tissue cell proliferation and differentiation [18]. Elevated  
114 glucose has been shown to cause mitochondrial damage and dysfunction in muscle cell culture experiments [19],  
115 thereby potentially leading to impaired tissue energy metabolism and substrate utilization. Through these

116 combined mechanisms, hyperglycemia may enhance muscle protein catabolism leading to reduced lean body mass  
117 and strength [20-22]. In agreement with the above observations, people with T2D demonstrated activation of pro-  
118 inflammatory signaling pathways [23] and substantially enhanced protein breakdown [24] in skeletal muscle  
119 compared to healthy individuals. Muscle alterations are likely to become more clinically relevant when diabetes-  
120 induced hyperglycemia is associated with synergistic oxidative, pro-inflammatory, and insulin-desensitizing  
121 conditions such as aging or chronic and acute disease.

122



## Adipose tissue

Adipose tissue plays a major role in maintaining whole-body metabolic homeostasis [25], but its accumulation is associated with adverse outcomes such as metabolic syndrome and diabetes,

131 cardiovascular events and several chronic diseases [26]. In recent years, research findings have revealed that  
132 qualitative changes in metabolic and endocrine characteristics of adipocytes (adiposopathy) mediate aspects of  
133 human disease. Metabolic research breakthroughs have uncovered ways that adipose tissue has substantial impact  
134 on energy balance, insulin resistance, inflammation and obesity-associated complications. Recently, differences  
135 between white and brown adipocytes have been described. White adipose tissue is the most abundant type of  
136 adipose tissue in human adults, and it  
137 functions as an energy store as well as a  
138 modulator of whole-body substrate utilization

**FIGURE 1: Summary overview of whole-body metabolic homeostasis.** A. Digestible carbohydrate (CHO) provide glucose from the gut, which also hosts microbiota that may process otherwise indigestible complex CHO. B. Glucose is the major energy source for the brain, which provides cues to the body about glucose availability. C. The liver produces glucose from non-glucose sources during fasting for tissue energy needs and may store glucose as glycogen. D. Skeletal muscle may provide amino acids to other organs for energy and functional needs during fasting as well as in catabolic and disease conditions. E. Adipose tissue mass may be enhanced by excess glucose availability; excess lipid substrates may conversely infiltrate skeletal muscle and liver tissues thereby contributing to insulin resistance and impaired glucose metabolism.

139 and metabolism through its endocrine functions [27]. Brown adipose tissue has an increasingly recognized  
140 metabolic importance due to its higher mitochondrial content with high levels of uncoupling. These features lead  
141 to generation of heat (thermogenesis) associated with energy dissipation that may favor resistance to obesity and  
142 diet-induced weight gain [28]. Lower brown adipose tissue content has been described in people with obesity or  
143 T2D than in healthy individuals [29]. Experimental research has indicated that white adipose tissue can be  
144 converted into its more beneficial, metabolically active brown counterpart, and this process has become the target  
145 of intensive research [27, 30-33]. Irisin, an exercise-induced myokine, is thought to underlie the observed  
146 browning of adipose tissue in experimental models [30]. Although controversy surrounds the role of irisin in  
147 humans [34], this process may further underscore the potential importance of loss of muscle mass and function in  
148 the onset of obesity-associated metabolic complications.

149       Glucose modulates adipose tissue metabolism and mass both directly and indirectly by increasing insulin  
150 secretion and plasma concentration. Hyperinsulinemia is a key inducer of lipogenesis and adipose tissue  
151 expansion, and selective adipose tissue insulin receptor knockout may protect from fat tissue accumulation [35,  
152 36] (Figure 1E). In agreement with the emerging view of inter-organ cross-talk to regulate metabolism,  
153 experimental models have demonstrated that glucose is able to re-direct stem cells derived from non-adipose  
154 tissues such as skeletal muscle to differentiate into ectopic adipocytes [37].

## 155 **Liver**

156 Interactions between carbohydrate and fat substrate availability may affect non-adipose tissues in the body by  
157 favoring ectopic lipid deposition [38]; non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD) and non-alcoholic steatohepatitis  
158 (NASH) represent a relevant example of this negative interplay. NAFLD is an early indicator of insulin resistance  
159 and metabolic syndrome in people with obesity [39], triggered by inflammatory processes induced by overfeeding.  
160 Carbohydrates play a key role in the onset of NAFLD, with a negative impact for both excess glucose and fructose,  
161 whereas complex and non-digestible carbohydrates may be protective [40, 41]. High glucose contributes to the  
162 onset of NAFLD also by enhancing circulating insulin, which in turn contributes to hepatic lipogenesis.  
163 Inflammation and pro-inflammatory signals are generated by excess fat accumulation [26, 42, 43] and are also

164 directly triggered by endotoxin translocation from the gut to the liver, with fructose being a major regulator of this  
165 process [44]. Underlying molecular mechanisms of liver damage are not fully understood but may involve the  
166 immune response and activation of immune signaling pathways that can cause liver damage and fibrosis [45-48].  
167 Steatosis is reported to be ameliorated by intake of omega-3 polyunsaturated fatty acids (PUFAs) [49] and complex  
168 carbohydrates [50, 51]; elements of the Mediterranean diet [52, 53] and the Asian diet [54, 55] may therefore  
169 prevent metabolic liver disease. NAFLD can also be combatted by the fostering of a healthy and diverse population  
170 of gut microbiota, as discussed below [44, 56-59].

## 171 **Gut and gut microbiota**

172 The gut plays central roles in the processing of carbohydrates and thereby influences glucose balance in the body  
173 (Figure 1A). Gut endocrine functions and the gut bacterial population (microbiota) are emerging key players in the  
174 regulation of intermediary metabolism. Unfavorable microbiota may contribute to the onset of obesity and  
175 metabolic syndrome mainly by triggering pro-inflammatory responses, and by favoring efficient nutrient  
176 absorption [60, 61]. On the other hand, beneficial bacterial strains may result in protection from metabolic  
177 disease, and interaction with non-digestible dietary carbohydrates contributes to this effect. In particular, dietary  
178 fibers interact with the gut microbiota and may reduce inflammation and unfavorable metabolic responses,  
179 thereby also reducing hepatic steatosis [41, 62]. Gut microbiota-driven fermentation of non-digestible  
180 carbohydrates or prebiotics can decrease carbohydrate-induced blood glucose spikes that occur after a meal [63].  
181 Probiotics may further modulate release of gut peptides including glucagon-like peptide 1 (GLP-1), also potentially  
182 contributing to limit obesity and its metabolic complications (45, 82). Fermentation of non-digestible  
183 carbohydrates also results in production of short chain fatty acids (SCFAs) that may play protective roles and  
184 reduce the risk for systemic and local disease including cancer. Obese individuals are reported to display  
185 metabolically unfavorable populations of gut microbes, and weight loss after gastric bypass surgery may shift this  
186 pattern towards one resembling normal weight individuals [64, 65]. The possibility of harnessing microbiota to  
187 treat obesity and metabolic disease is under intensive investigation. Small-scale clinical studies of probiotic  
188 supplementation have found favorable changes to glucose and fat metabolism [61, 66-68]. Research has identified  
189 metabolically beneficial bacterial strains in the gut microbiota, like *Lactobacillus*, and *Bifidobacterium*, or

190 *Akkermansia*, though their role as modulators of the host metabolism is still debated [69, 70]. Larger and longer-  
191 term human trials are still necessary before tailored probiotic use can be incorporated into official guidelines for  
192 the treatment of obesity and metabolic syndrome [61, 71].

## 193 **Fructose**

194 Glucose is the body's key form of energy and the most clinically relevant carbohydrate employed in patient  
195 nutritional support. For these reasons, glucose is the main focus of the current review. However, glucose is not the  
196 only simple sugar available through the diet. Fructose (as a monosaccharide or in the disaccharide sucrose) is also  
197 found in a variety of foods, but is processed differently by the body. Fructose has also been a focus of research, as  
198 it not only enters the diet through fruits but also is added to juices and other food products as a sweetener, and  
199 therefore is widely consumed. After absorption, fructose is metabolized by the liver and can be converted into  
200 glucose, lactate, and fatty acids. Fructose-induced hepatic lactate release is a unique feature and opposite to  
201 extrahepatic lactate flux to the liver for de novo glucose production. High-fructose diets have been reported to  
202 decrease insulin-mediated suppression of glucose production and to increase hepatic lipogenesis and plasma  
203 triglyceride concentrations [72], although recent meta-analyses have failed to confirm associations between  
204 fructose intake and several metabolic alterations potentially due to additional adaptive changes [73]. As  
205 introduced above, a stronger link has been established between fructose and non-alcoholic fatty liver disease  
206 (NAFLD), involving stimulation by fructose ingestion of pro-inflammatory signals reaching the liver from the gut  
207 [44, 46, 74]. Ingestion of a fructose-free diabetes-specific nutrition supplement formula (DSF) was shown to cause  
208 lower blood glucose concentrations in patients with diabetes than formulas with fructose [75], and physical activity  
209 has been shown to attenuate its deleterious effects on glycemic control [76]. However, as these effects of fructose  
210 are still debated [73], additional trials to determine whether fructose in particular should be avoided in the diet are  
211 necessary.



## 212 **3. Recommendations for glycemic management and nutritional** 213 **support**

### 214 **Obesity, metabolic syndrome, and diabetes**

#### 215 **Diet and lifestyle**

216 Obesity and excess adiposity can lead to the development of glucose insensitivity, impaired insulin action, and  
217 inability to properly regulate glycemic variations. Although dietary recommendations aimed at weight loss have  
218 recently emphasized the importance of inducing energy deficits, at least in part independently of diet composition,  
219 high GI and GL foods are associated with metabolic disease risk and health complications [3-5]. Lowering dietary GI  
220 and GL may conversely improve these outcomes and benefit patients with obesity and diabetes [6-11]. Non-  
221 digestible carbohydrates may also provide beneficial metabolic effects. Soluble fiber is reported to decrease  
222 postprandial plasma glucose concentration and it may additionally decrease blood LDL-cholesterol concentration  
223 [7, 77]. Insoluble fiber, especially cereal fiber, decreases the risk of T2D and cardiovascular disease [78]. High fiber  
224 intake is therefore recommended for people with diabetes or at risk of developing diabetes, including people with  
225 obesity and metabolic syndrome (i.e. the cluster of cardiometabolic risk factors including high waist circumference,  
226 high blood pressure, elevated blood glucose and dyslipidemia with high triglycerides and low HDL-cholesterol).  
227 Such nutritional recommendations (Tables 1, 2) have been increasingly introduced by several health care  
228 organizations and are currently included in guidelines for patients with or at risk of developing T2D, and they are  
229 also appropriate for the management of plasma glucose concentration in type 1 diabetes (T1D) [79-81].

230

231 **Table 1. Nutrition support guidelines and expert opinions for glycemic management in patients with diabetes**  
 232 **mellitus types 1 and 2.** T1D, type 1 diabetes; T2D, type 2 diabetes; IDF, International Diabetes Foundation; ADA,  
 233 American Diabetes Association; NICE, National Institute for Health and Care Excellence; EASD, European  
 234 Association for the Study of Diabetes; ESE, European Society of Endocrinology; SFAR, French Society of Anesthesia  
 235 and Intensive Care; SRLF, Intensive Care Society (French language); SCCM, Society of Critical Care Medicine; ASPEN,  
 236 American Society for Parenteral and Enteral Nutrition  
 237

Patient population	Region	Source	Title	Glucose management guideline
T1D	Europe, Worldwide	IDF	IDF 2011 Postmeal glucose guidelines [82]	Measure postmeal plasma glucose 1-2 hours after a meal; target for postmeal glucose is 9.0 mmol/l (160 mg/dL) as long as hypo-glycemia is avoided.
	US	ADA	Standards of Medical Care in Diabetes-2016 [79]	Target premeal capillary plasma glucose, 80–130 mg/dL (4.4–7.2 mmol/L). Target peak postmeal glucose <180 mg/dL (10.0 mmol/L). Individualize goals, as needed.
	UK	NICE	NICE NG17. Type 1 diabetes in adults: diagnosis and management 2015 [83]	Aim for a fasting plasma glucose level of 5–7 mmol/L on waking and a plasma glucose level of 4–7 mmol/L before meals at other times of day.
T2D	Europe and US	ADA and EASD	Management of hyperglycaemia in type 2 diabetes: a patient-centered approach 2012 [84]; Updated in 2015 [85]	The usual HbA1c goal cut-off point is 7% (53.0 mol/mol), but individualized targets are advised depending on other health factors.
	Europe and US	NICE	NICE NG28. Type 2 diabetes in adults: management 2015[86]	Aim for HbA1c goal of 7%, but individualized target, as needed.

238  
239

240 **Table 2. Nutrition support guidelines and expert opinions for glycemic management in patients with stress**  
 241 **metabolism or metabolic syndrome/obesity.** ADA, American Diabetes Association; EASD, European Association  
 242 for the Study of Diabetes; ESE, European Society of Endocrinology; SFAR, French Society of Anesthesia and  
 243 Intensive Care; SRLF, Intensive Care Society (French language); SCCM, Society of Critical Care Medicine; ASPEN,  
 244 American Society for Parenteral and Enteral Nutrition

Patient population	Region	Source	Title	Glucose management guideline
Stress metabolism/hospitalized patients	Europe and US	ADA, ESE, others	Management of hyperglycemia in hospitalized patients in non-critical care setting; Umpierrez 2012 [87]	Premeal glucose target < 140 mg/dL (7.8 mmol/L) and random glucose < 180 mg/dL (10.0 mmol/L) for most patients hospitalized with non-critical illness
	Europe	SFAR, SRLF	International recommendations for glucose control in adult non-diabetic critically ill patients; Ichai 2010 [88]	Not possible to recommend a single glucose threshold common to all types of patients and diseases. Avoid excessive hyperglycemia (>10 mmol/L) in critically ill patients
	US	ASPEN, SCCM	Guidelines for the provision and assessment of nutrition support therapy in the adult critically ill patient; McClave 2016 [89]	Target blood glucose range of 140 or 150–180 mg/dL for the general ICU population; ranges may differ for specific patient populations (cardio-vascular surgery, head trauma)
	US	Expert opinion	Inpatient management of diabetes and hyperglycemia; Bogun 2013 [90]	Good (mid-100 mg/dL range) but not necessarily stringent (<110 mg/dL) glucose control is the preferred approach in the ICU setting
	Canada	Critical Care Nutrition	2015 Clinical Practice Guidelines [79]	Avoid hyperglycemia (> 10 mmol/L) in all critically ill patients. Use blood glucose target of around 8.0 mmol/L (or 7-9 mmol/L), rather than a more stringent (4.4 to 6.1 mmol/L) or a more liberal target range (10 to 11.1 mmol/L)
Obesity/Metabolic syndrome	Europe	EASD	Evidence-based nutritional approaches to the treatment and prevention of diabetes mellitus; Mann 2004 [81]	No target glycemic range recommended, but weight loss and physical activity are recommended to lessen insulin resistance, thus lowering blood glucose levels
	US and Canada	Expert consensus for ASPEN, SCCM	Current strategies of critical care assessment and therapy of the obese patient (hypocaloric feeding) McClave 2016 [89]	Glycemic targets not different from those for all critically ill adults; use frequent glucose monitoring due to higher risk for insulin resistance

245

#### 246 **Disease-specific nutritional supplement formulas for diabetes**

247 Nutritional support can cause or exacerbate hyperglycemia, especially in obese and diabetic patients, and  
248 hyperglycemia is associated with higher morbidity and mortality [91, 92]. In the clinical nutrition setting, a  
249 burgeoning field of research is dedicated to designing nutritional support products for people with diabetes. Such  
250 products aim to limit glycemic variation after administration [93]. Diabetes-specific formulas (DSF) have many of  
251 the following ingredients in common: a) lower carbohydrate content than standard formulas (SFs); b) higher  
252 proportion of complex carbohydrates that are slowly digestible to reduce blood glucose spiking; c) modified  
253 maltodextrin, starch, fructose, isomaltulose, and sucromalt, rather than the maltodextrin, starch, and sucrose  
254 found in SFs [94]; d) fat content enriched in unsaturated fatty acids, especially monounsaturated fatty acids, in  
255 higher proportion than in SFs [87]; e) fiber content higher than in SFs [95].

256 Based on this available evidence, the ESPEN expert group endorses the utilization of DSFs for nutritional support of  
257 people with obesity and diabetes. When parenteral nutrition must be used, the risk of hyperglycemia in obese and  
258 diabetic patients can be reduced if the initial amounts of glucose provided in the TPN bag are limited to less than 2  
259 g/kg/day until proper glycemic control is observed [96]. With the use of enteral nutrition, the risk of hyperglycemia  
260 can be decreased by modification of the total amount and of the quality of carbohydrates used. Numerous short-  
261 and mid-term studies prove that enteral DSFs are associated with reduced postprandial blood glucose,  
262 postprandial blood insulin, mean blood glucose values, glycemic variability, short-acting insulin requirements, and  
263 changes in HbA1c [75, 97-102]. As with any other treatment decision, the individual patient features, different  
264 clinical settings, and various combinations of insulin therapy may influence the choice between an enteral SF or  
265 DSF for patients with obesity or diabetes. Additional randomized controlled studies are desirable to identify  
266 optimal formula composition for different clinical conditions.

#### 267 **Recovery from surgery and critical illness**

268 Acute states of metabolic stress often occur in the presence of disease. Such alterations may occur in individuals  
269 with otherwise normal weight and glucose metabolism, or in patients with obesity, metabolic syndrome, or

270 diabetes for reasons related or unrelated to the illness causing the metabolic stress. Critical illness and recovery  
271 from surgery are common clinical conditions requiring specific consideration.

## 272 **Nutrition for enhanced recovery in surgical patients**

273 Conventional thinking about the nutritional support of surgical patients has been challenged in recent years by a  
274 body of evidence demonstrating the relevant negative impact of metabolic complications on outcome, as well as  
275 the importance of nutrition to limit acute metabolic derangements. In particular, it has been clearly established  
276 that insulin resistance is a key mechanism behind developments of complications and delayed recovery in surgical  
277 patients [103]. Enhanced Recovery After Surgery (ERAS®) is a multi-modal perioperative care pathway shown to  
278 lead to major improvements in outcomes in patients undergoing abdominal surgery; many ERAS elements reduce  
279 insulin resistance, as summarized in recent guidelines [104]. Nutritional intervention may focus on overcoming the  
280 traditional concept of fasting as well as on the general indication for immune-nutrition to reduce morbidity.  
281 Traditional surgical practices have emphasized the importance of fasting overnight before the procedure, but new  
282 research has exposed this protocol as harmful to recovery [105]. Studies had originally indicated that a fixed  
283 amount of mixed complex carbohydrates can be administered orally as a drink on the evening before surgery and  
284 in the morning up to two hours before anesthesia, resulting in lower insulin resistance following surgical stress  
285 with a positive impact on recovery and length of hospital stay [106]. In general, as reflected in fasting guidelines for  
286 the past 20 years, evidence shows that clear fluids can be taken up to two hours before and that solids can be  
287 ingested up to six hours before surgery [107]. Efforts should be made to perform surgical procedures under the  
288 best attainable nutritional conditions, which may include nutritional support in combination with exercise before  
289 intervention [108]. Finally, the health care provider can prescribe pharmaco-nutrient support, including arginine  
290 and omega-3 fatty acids, to positively modulate immune response and limit inflammation to reduce morbidity,  
291 with particular regard to infectious complications. These can attenuate the inflammation and improve immune  
292 responses that may be impaired by surgery [105, 107], thereby lessening the risk for infection as well as insulin  
293 resistance and hyperglycemia [109].

294 **Glucose and nutritional support in critically ill patients**

295 Glucose is the preferential physiological substrate for the production of energy in emergency conditions, including  
296 the acute phase of critical illness. However, in the intensive care unit (ICU), acute metabolic stress commonly leads  
297 to insulin resistance and hyperglycemia. Avoiding high blood glucose concentrations with insulin infusion improves  
298 the outcomes (morbidity and mortality) of ICU patients in some studies, but not in others [110-112]. The optimal  
299 glycemic target is hence undefined and could differ between patients, time from injury, and setting. A strong  
300 association has also been reported between high glucose variability as well as hypoglycemia and poor outcomes in  
301 the critically ill [113-116]. There is, however, consensus on the importance of effectively and closely monitoring  
302 plasma glucose during critical illness to reduce variability. To this aim, automated systems for glucose control and  
303 near-continuous glucose monitoring may provide more reliable tools to stabilize glycemia, and their  
304 implementation is therefore recommended.

305 Glucose control may become more problematic while implementing effective nutritional treatment in acute critical  
306 illness. Enteral nutrition (EN) support has been shown to increase hyperglycemia risk in hospitalized patients.  
307 However, this increase is less important than for parenteral nutrition, as enteral feeding triggers an elevation of  
308 insulin known as the incretin effect [117-119]. When EN cannot be tolerated and parenteral nutrition (PN) is  
309 necessary, the high dextrose delivered by standard PN formulas can further exacerbate the stress-related  
310 hyperglycemia, even in non-diabetic critically ill patients [91, 92, 96, 115, 120]. Thus both calorie and glucose  
311 administration, particularly in early phases of critical illness, also commonly lead to higher insulin requirements to  
312 control glycemia, with higher risk for glycemic variability and potential stimulation of lipogenesis. Additional care  
313 should be taken to minimize these risks.

314 Furthermore, it is difficult to determine the optimal carbohydrate amount to administer to critically ill patients for  
315 several reasons. These include difficulty in assessing energy requirements, altered enteral absorption, and  
316 impaired suppression of endogenous glucose production. One study compared glucose-based energy to lipid-  
317 based energy provision in ICU patients and found that glucose was associated with trends for hyperglycemia,  
318 higher insulin requirements, enhanced lipogenesis, and no improvement in protein sparing [121]. DSFs containing  
319 higher proportions of fat and modified carbohydrates have not been extensively assessed in ICU patients, but

320 recent data suggest that the use of these formulas improves glycemic control, and, in at least one study, this was  
321 shown to provide clinical benefit [100]. Further studies should address interactions between glucose, lipid, and  
322 protein substrates, as well as the potential metabolic impact of higher utilization of lipid substrates for energy  
323 provision.

324 Guidelines for nutritional strategy and composition of nutritional supplements have been published for practical  
325 indications to achieve glucose control in critically ill patients [79, 87-90] (Tables 1, 2). Suggestions from these  
326 published studies include: 1) intervene with EN support as soon as possible to limit caloric debt [122]; 2) minimize  
327 glycemic variability in patients who must take PN, with a target blood glucose of 90-150 mg/dl (5-8 mM) [123]; 3)  
328 avoid hypoglycemia as a result of these approaches. For the avoidance of hyperglycemia, predisposing factors  
329 should be identified [124-126], and administration of intravenous insulin to critically ill patients should be  
330 restricted when appropriate.

331 Based on the above considerations and the impact of calories on glucose metabolism and plasma concentrations,  
332 the issue of limiting calorie administration to critically ill patients, particularly those with obesity, has been  
333 considered [89]. Moderately hypocaloric feeding with high-protein content aimed at counteracting protein  
334 catabolism and muscle loss has been suggested in recent guidelines for critically ill obese patients (22-25 kcal/kg of  
335 ideal body weight per day, 2 g/kg protein of body weight if BMI is less than 40 kg/m<sup>2</sup>, or 2.5 if BMI is greater than  
336 40 kg/m<sup>2</sup>) [89]. It should be pointed out that such recommendations are mainly aimed at minimizing metabolic  
337 abnormalities such as glucose variability and potential hyperlipidemia, rather than directly inducing weight loss.  
338 Additional research is desirable on optimal calorie provision for obese hospitalized patients with acute disease  
339 conditions requiring nutritional support.

340

#### 341 **4. Summary and conclusions**

342 While carbohydrates, which provide glucose to the body to support metabolism, are crucial to the diet,  
343 inappropriate intake can lead to hyperglycemia, hypoglycemia, and glycemic fluctuations that are harmful to  
344 health outcomes (Figure 2).

345 Excess glucose ingestion interacts with the gut and its microbiome and ultimately affects a number of organs  
346 including skeletal muscle, adipose tissue, and the liver. Excess glucose availability may induce expansion of adipose  
347 tissue and may favor ectopic fat deposition into liver and muscle tissues, which further exacerbates insulin  
348 resistance and glycemic imbalances. Insulin resistance is associated with, and can promote progression of,  
349 metabolic syndrome and eventually T2D, and it represents a factor contributing to hyperglycemia, glucose  
350 variability, and poor outcomes in the critically ill or those recovering from surgery.

351 Optimal nutritional support for patients with obesity and T2D should limit glucose provision, and plasma glucose  
352 should be carefully monitored in order to avoid harmful glucose fluctuations. In the surgical situation, preoperative  
353 fasting should be avoided as part of ERAS protocols to optimize outcomes, particularly in abdominal surgical  
354 patients. In critical illness, limiting glucose content in enteral and parenteral nutrition formulas may provide  
355 benefits, although safety of higher lipid administration should also be assessed. It should be finally recognized that  
356 more high-quality trials specifically addressing optimal enteral and parenteral nutrition compositions aimed at  
357 avoiding or minimizing clinical consequences of insulin resistance and hyperglycemia are needed for optimal  
358 clinical recommendations in these important areas of patient treatment.

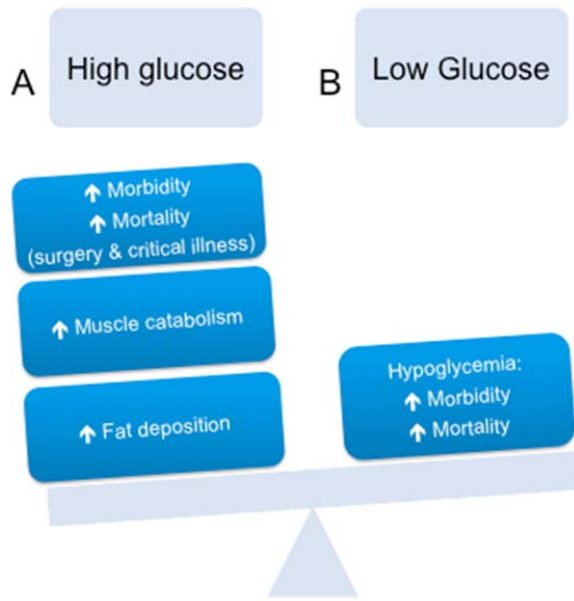
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#### 360 **Acknowledgment**

361 The authors thank Dr. Cecilia Hofmann (C. Hofmann & Associates, Western Springs, IL, USA) for her capable  
362 assistance with writing, reference management, and editing the manuscript.

363





**Figure 2. Consequences of glucose imbalance.** A. Hyperglycemia (elevated blood glucose) may contribute to enhance adiposity and to muscle catabolism; in addition, hyperglycemia favors complications in acute disease conditions including surgery and critical illness. B. Hypoglycemia (low blood glucose) can be fatal, especially in critically ill patients. Glycemic variability with uncontrolled swings in blood glucose towards both hyperglycemia and hypoglycemia is associated with poor outcomes after surgery and can be fatal to those in critical conditions.

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