

Alternative treatments for diabetes -- do they work?

Supplements include Sugar Crush and Blood Sugar, which make varying claims.

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There's something about Type 2 diabetes that inspires creativity, innovation and promises from the alternative medicine industry. People who want to control their blood sugar without medications can choose from a huge variety of pills and elixirs. "I hear new claims on a nearly daily basis," says Dr. Daniel Einhorn, clinical professor of medicine at UC San Diego and the president of the American Assn. of Clinical Endocrinologists. "There's a constant market for new products." Many current products take an herbal approach to blood sugar control. The liquid supplement Sugar Crush from NaturEra, for example, combines common sage, cinnamon, hibiscus and fenugreek, among other ingredients.

The product comes in two varieties, regular Sugar Crush and Sugar Crush Daily. Type 2 users are instructed to drink 2.5 milliliters of regular Sugar Crush mixed with a glass of water right before breakfast and dinner every day. Sugar Crush Daily is recommended as a prelude to lunch and bedtime. After two or three months, type 2 users are told that they can stop taking Sugar Crush and stick with two doses of Sugar Crush Daily, one before each of the two largest meals of the day. Type 1 use Sugar Crush Daily at their largest meals. Sugar Crush isn't yet sold in stores — company President Uri Man says it will be widely available starting in March — but you can buy a 125 ml bottle of either variety online for \$65.

The Sugar Crush website says that the products "are the world's first liquid, clinically tested, completely natural dietary supplements which help maintain healthy glucose levels." Man, the NaturEra president, says that company studies have found that the supplements, which are already very popular in Israel, have been shown to help maintain healthy blood sugar levels in just 30 days. The company did get its research published at a recent meeting of the American Diabetes Assn. and a Sugar Crush clinical study was accepted for Poster Presentation by the American Assn. of Diabetes Educators. (Both the ADA and the AADE declined to comment on Sugar Crush or any other specific products.)

The website for Nature's Way Blood Sugar hardly makes any claims beyond the name of the supplement. The site simply says that the product contains "chromium which is an important factor for insulin." A spokesperson for the company declined to answer any questions about the ingredients or potential benefits of the product. There's no doubt that diet — including supplement choices — can affect blood sugar levels. "It would be very attractive to have natural treatments," he says.

Richard Anderson, a research chemist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Diet, Genomics and Immunology lab in Beltsville, Md., has a more optimistic view of the potential of herbs and supplements, especially cinnamon and chromium. Anderson says research in his lab — including human trials of Cinnulin PF — suggests that each of these ingredients can increase the body's sensitivity to insulin. A 2006 study of 22 people with pre-diabetes published in the Journal of the International Society of Sports Nutrition found that taking 500 mg of Cinnulin PF a day for 12 weeks reduced fasting blood glucose — a measure of blood sugar after one hasn't eaten for eight hours that is used to diagnose pre-diabetes or diabetes — by about 8%. And in 2007, researchers at UC San Francisco reported in the journal Pharmacotherapy that cinnamon might have "modest" effects on blood sugar, but they also warned that the spice shouldn't be used as a substitute for standard treatment of diabetes, including exercise, a healthy diet and prescription drugs.