Will my blood glucose level increase when I consume 15ml of Lactus Syrup (for treatment of constipation) or even sweet cough syrup and sweet tablets for sore throat?

Dr Ben Ng Jen Min, consultant endocrinologist, Arden Endocrinology Specialist Clinic, replies:

Many supplements and medications that we consume contain sugar (most commonly cough sweets and lozenges) or may cause a rise in blood sugars (e.g. steroids , some blood pressure medications).

Though this may be true, it does not always mean that people with diabetes or abnormal sugars should avoid these medications completely.

Many sweets and cough drops do contain some sugar and they do cause a rise in blood sugars shortly after they are consumed. Although this can be viewed as potentially 'harmful', the small spike in glucose caused by the cough drop in itself is usually unlikely to cause problems unless consumed in excess.

Having said that, most of the lozenges and cough drops nowadays have sugar-free options which to do not cause a rise in blood sugars. For people with diabetes, this is ,of course, preferred when it comes down to blood sugars.

An exception to the rule is of some laxatives which contain sugar. Because the agents can change the transit time in which carbohydrate is absorbed in the gut, some clinical papers have actually shown a small reduction (rather than an increase) in blood sugars post meal after this medications are consumed.

It must be pointed out that these therapies are not to be used as anti-diabetic agents as the effect is small but it is reassuring to know that the agents can be used in people with diabetes.

In summary, there are many over-the-counter medications that contain sugar. It would be unfair for me to suggest that people with diabetes are to avoid these medications completely. However, I think the following issues need to be thought over before one consumes any form of therapy:

1 ***Do I really need to take this medication?*** I think it is useful to think about why you are taking the medication or supplements and how this is going to benefit you. For people with diabetes, the question is whether a suitable alternative can be sought.

2 ***How long do I have to take this and what harm will it do?*** As pointed out, if you are taking sugar-containing lozenges for a few days, my thoughts are that it is very likely to be safe.

A sweet contains usually about 10g of sugar which would cause a minimal rise in your blood sugar, if only one is consumed.

Of course, if a large amount is to be consumed over a long period of time, perhaps an alternative form of therapy can be sought.

Are all chocolates bad for people with diabetes? Can I eat chocolates once in a while?

Kohila Govindaraju, nutritionist, The Berries nutrition consulting, replies:

You will be pleased to know that chocolates are not always bad for you. Yes you can eat chocolate, if the chocolate is dark. Dark chocolate improves insulin resistance and sensitivity. So, go for dark chocolates with higher cocoa content. Many are not too fond of dark chocolate, due to its bitter taste. But it is low in sugar and has no added milk or fat!

Dark chocolate contains healthy flavonoids, a class of polyphenols, that are also found in red wine, tea, fruit and vegetables. Polyphenols have a cardio-protective effect, because of their ability to scavenge free radicals and inhibit lipid oxidation Catechin, which is known to improve hypertension, from chocolate is more bioavailable* than green tea.

Dark chocolate is less processed and, hence, its flavonoids are retained which help lower the blood pressure and cholesterol. The higher the percentage of dark chocolate, the higher the amount of flavonoids the chocolate has!

While shopping for chocolate, choose 70% or higher cocoa content with cocoa butter and sugar. Seventy per cent or more cocoa concentration will improve vascular functions and plasma antioxidant status.

Cocoa butter, a fat from cocoa bean, is found predominantly in dark chocolate. It contributes to the flavour release of the chocolate. Cocoa butter contains a saturated fat called stearic acid that has a neutral effect on blood cholesterol.

Dark chocolate is 75% cocoa while a standard milk chocolate is 25% or less cocoa. Milk chocolate is made by combining milk solids with sweetener and flavourings and has only 12 to 25% cocoa content.

The sugar, milk and other ingredients like processed fats, palm oil, etc, added to the cocoa powder eventually increase the caloric load of commercially available chocolate and also reduce the health benefits of the natural cocoa powder. The effect of flavonal is also reduced when cocoa is consumed with milk.

Studies show that having dark chocolate (20 to 30g) once or twice a week will reduce the risk of developing heart failure by a third.

A balanced diet and regular physical activity is the key to a healthy heart. But take note that 30g of 70% dark chocolate still has 160 calories and 12g (7g from saturated fat) of fat. So, it is wise not to eat too much!

References
Cesar G Fraga. Cocoa, diabetes, and hypertension: should we eat more chocolate. Am J Clin Nutr March 2005 vol. 81 no. 3 541-542

Janice F Wang, Derek D Schramm, Roberta R Holt, Jodi L Ensunsa, Ceesar G Fraga, Harold H Schmitz, and Carl L Keen. A Dose-Response

* Bioavailability is the rate at which a drug or supplement gets absorbed by the bloodstream and is made available to be used by the body.