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The effect of aging on carbohydrate metabolism: A review of the English literature and a practical approach to the diagnosis of diabetes mellitus in the elderly

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Abstract

There seems little doubt that the disposal of a glucose load is progressively impaired during aging. The mechanism(s) for this alteration remains unclear. Five possibilities have been raised: (1) poor diet, (2) physical inactivity, (3) decreased lean body mass in which to store the carbohydrate load, (4) decreased insulin secretion, and (5) insulin antagonism. Although poor diet and physical inactivity may contribute to some of the abnormal glucose tolerance tests of the older population, these two factors do not provide a full explanation. Diminished lean body mass may play some role but there is almost certainly an additional effect due to aging. A few papers have suggested that glucose-induced

insulin secretion may be impaired as the population ages, but the bulk of studies in this area conclude that normal or increased amounts of insulin are released by the pancreatic β -cell during aging. If abnormalities of insulin secretion exist, either in degree or timing, they are subtle and would not seem sufficient to account for the great number of older subjects who manifest impaired glucose tolerance. The evidence for insulin antagonism seems the strongest but the data are certainly not conclusive. In actuality, the aging effect on carbohydrate metabolism may be heterogeneous in nature. Either some or all of these five factors may contribute to the aging effect to varying degrees in individual subjects. Alternatively, the glucose intolerance of aging may represent a heterogeneous group of disorders. In any event, until better methods to identify possible subgroups of these subjects and/or a marker for diabetes mellitus independent of glucose concentration become available, this problem will remain difficult to resolve. Based on the currently available data, it seems prudent to diagnose diabetes mellitus only if fasting hyperglycemia is present.



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