"The first thing the reasonable man must do is to be content with a very little knowledge and a very great deal of ignorance. The second thing he must do is to make the utmost possible use of the knowledge he has and not waste his energy crying for the moon. The third thing he must do is try and see clearly where his knowledge ends and his ignorance begins."
— Arthur David Ritchie

I've heard many beekeepers whose enthusiasm far exceeded their education tell anyone willing to listen how honey cures everything from infertility to cancer. While legitimate medical science tells us that honey can indeed be good for wound dressing and relieving sore throats, most of the extensive health claims I hear from beekeepers are somewhere between wishful thinking and pure fantasy. Along those lines, how many times have you heard a beekeeper say something like, "Honey is good for diabetics to eat"? But how many times have you heard a diabetic say that? What is the basis for many beekeepers thinking what they do, and does it have any merit?

What is diabetes?

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):

Your body breaks down most of the food you eat into sugar (glucose) and releases it into your bloodstream. When your blood sugar goes up, it signals your pancreas to release insulin. Insulin acts like a key to let the blood sugar into your body's cells for use as energy.

With diabetes, your body doesn't make enough insulin or can't use it as well as it should. When there isn't enough insulin or cells stop responding to insulin, too much blood sugar stays in your bloodstream. Over time, that can cause serious health problems, such as heart disease, vision loss, and kidney disease.

What is the glycemic index and glycemic load?

Harvard Medical School defines glycemic index and glycemic load as:

Common Sweeteners	Glycemic Index	Common Sweeteners	Glycemic Index
Maltodextrin	110	Honey	50
Glucose	100	Sorghum	50
High fructose corn syrup	87	Lactose	45
Table sugar	80	Brown rice syrup	25
Corn syrup	75	Xylitol	12
Sucrose	65	Agave syrup	11
Molasses	55	Mannitol	2
Maple syrup	54	Stevia	< 1

Source:
https://www.webmd.com/diabetes/honey-diabetes

The glycemic index (GI) assigns a numeric score to a food based on how drastically it makes your blood sugar rise. Foods are ranked on a scale of 0 to 100, with pure glucose (sugar) given a value of 100. The lower a food's glycemic index, the slower blood sugar rises after eating that food. In general, the more processed a food is, the higher its GI, and the more fiber or fat in a food, the lower it's GI.

But the glycemic index tells just part of the story. What it doesn't tell you is how high your blood sugar could go when you actually eat the food. To understand a food's complete effect on blood sugar, you need to know both how quickly it makes glucose enter the bloodstream and how much glucose per serving it can deliver. A separate measure called the glycemic load does both — which gives you a more accurate picture of a food's real-life impact on your blood sugar. Watermelon, for example, has a high glycemic index (80). But a serving of watermelon has so little carbohydrate that its glycemic load is only 5.

What is honey?

Honey is a natural product that has developed over millions of years for the purpose of providing a shelf-stable (long-term storable) source of carbohydrates for honey

bees. The National Honey Board says that typical honey is 39% fructose, 34% glucose, 17% water, 7% other incidental sugars, 2.5% other carbohydrates and 0.5% vitamins, minerals and amino acids. An omission from that list is Flavor, which of course is what makes honey special!

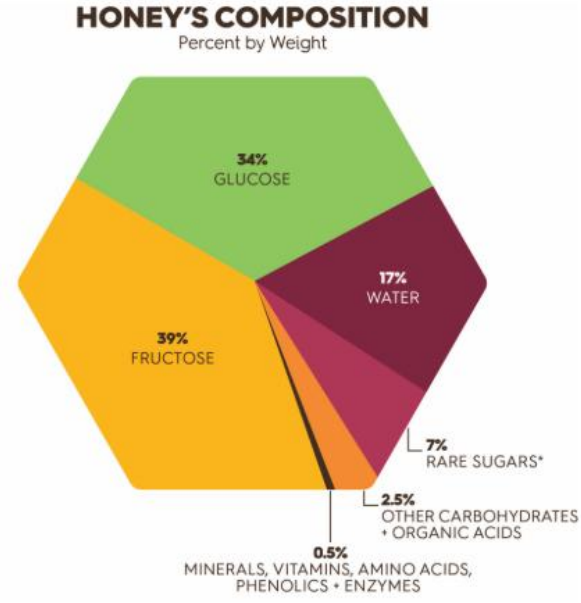
We beekeepers know that the exact proportion of fructose and glucose, as well as the incidental inclusion of other sugars, depends on the floral source. We also know that honey is definitely not a complete diet for our honey bees; they rely on pollen, not honey, for their protein, mineral and vitamin requirements. Those elements are found in trace amounts (meaning detectable but not of consequence in such small quantities) in honey, chiefly because honey itself inadvertently includes trace amounts of pollen.

With regard to glycemic index, the table above shows that honey comes in somewhere in the middle of the pack for common sweeteners. Since honey has a lower glycemic index than table sugar or corn syrup, does it follow that honey is "good" for diabetics? That logic would suggest that if someone wants to shoot themselves in the head, using a .22 caliber bullet would be healthier than using a .45. That line of thought misses the fundamental point.

My opinion

I'm not an endocrinologist or nutritionist, so my opinion isn't any weightier than the average person. But it seems to me that, for a diabetic, employing the concepts of glycemic index and glycemic load means that one food versus another is a question of the quantity consumed and their personal physiologic reaction to dietary sugar. Can a diabetic eat honey? Maybe or maybe not, depending on the characteristics and severity of their specific condition. Is honey "good" for diabetics? It tastes good, but there are other sweeteners that have better glycemic index profiles if that is the criteria we are basing "goodness" on.

Bottom line: if you are diabetic, I assume you are under competent professional care. If not, please seek that out. If we are not diabetic,



Source: National Honey Board

let's not wander into issues regarding someone else's health and safety unless we have legitimate expertise in those areas (which I don't with respect to diabetes). Knowing lots about honey bees and honey doesn't make me an expert in human endocrinology.

For more on this topic, see

- CDC's "Diabetes Basics"
- WebMD's "Honey and Diabetes: Effects on Blood Sugar and Health"
- GoodRx's "Can People With Diabetes Eat Honey? The Pros and Cons of the Natural Sweetener"
- Harvard Medical School's "The lowdown on glycemic index and glycemic load"
- For a beekeeping twist, see Rusty Burlew's "Is high-fructose corn syrup bad for bees?"

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