What is the glycemic index, how does it work, and is it something I should consider when selecting foods?

Imagine a roller coaster, with its constant ups and downs. This roller coaster can be compared to your blood glucose and insulin levels throughout your day. Your blood glucose is the amount of sugar circulating through your blood. The greater the amount of blood glucose you have, the more insulin is released in the body, which helps the cells use the glucose for energy. This cycle of blood glucose and insulin can either be a crazy roller coaster, with violent rises and falls, or it can be a peaceful ride with calm rises and falls. Whether you want to maintain weight loss, or have medical needs where you must maintain your blood glucose and insulin levels, the glycemic index (GI) can assist in achieving this peaceful ride.

The GI is the effect of food on blood glucose levels. Simply, it is the amount a certain food item raises your blood glucose levels. The GI classifies foods based on the likelihood that they will raise your blood glucose levels and is based on a scale of 0-100, with 100 being the body's reaction to pure glucose. Foods with a high GI, which is anything above 70, cause a fast rise in blood glucose levels, while foods with a low GI, or anything below 55, cause a slower rise in blood glucose.

The GI is helpful when selecting foods. Higher GI foods are starchy items like white rice and potatoes. Lower GI foods are often foods rich in fiber and nutritional content, like apples and beans. In comparison, foods with a lower GI are helpful in regulating blood glucose levels in the body and have a higher nutritional value than higher GI foods. For a list of food items and their GI, visit:

http://www.health.harvard.edu/newsweek/Glycemic_index_and_glycemic_load_for_100_food_items.htm

References
1. Insel P, Ross D, McMahon K, Bernstein M. Nutrition. Sudbury, MA: Jones and Bartlett Publishers; 2011
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