

Diabetes diet: Create your healthy-eating plan

Your diabetes diet is simply a healthy-eating plan that will help you control your blood sugar. Here's help getting started, from meal planning to exchange lists and counting carbohydrates.

By Mayo Clinic staff

A diabetes diet — medically known as medical nutrition therapy (MNT) for diabetes — simply translates into eating a variety of nutritious foods in moderate amounts and sticking to regular mealtimes.

Rather than a restrictive diet, a diabetes diet or MNT is a healthy-eating plan that's naturally rich in nutrients and low in fat and calories, with an emphasis on fruits, vegetables and whole grains. In fact, a diabetes diet is the best eating plan for most everyone.

Purpose

If you have diabetes or prediabetes, your doctor will likely recommend that you see a dietitian to guide you on dietary changes that can help you control your blood sugar (glucose) level and manage your weight.

When you eat excess calories and fat, your body responds by creating an undesirable rise in blood glucose. If blood glucose isn't kept in check, it can lead to serious problems, such as a dangerously high blood glucose level (hyperglycemia) and chronic complications, such as nerve, kidney and heart damage.

Making healthy food choices and tracking your eating habits can help you manage your blood glucose level and keep it within a safe range.

For most people with type 2 diabetes, losing pounds also can make it easier to control blood glucose and offers a host of other health benefits. If you need to lose weight, a diabetes diet provides a well-organized, nutritious way to reach your goal safely.

Diet details

A registered dietitian can help you put together a diet based on your health goals, tastes and lifestyle and can provide valuable information on how to change your eating habits.

Recommended foods

With MNT, quality is much more important than quantity. Make your calories count with these nutritious foods:

- **Healthy carbohydrates.** During digestion, sugars (simple carbohydrates) and starches (complex carbohydrates) break down into blood glucose. Focus on the healthiest carbohydrates, such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes (beans, peas and lentils) and low-fat dairy products.
- **Fiber-rich foods.** Dietary fiber includes all parts of plant foods that your body can't digest or absorb. Fiber can decrease the risk of heart disease and help control blood sugar levels. Foods high in fiber include vegetables, fruits, nuts, legumes (beans, peas and lentils), whole-wheat flour and wheat bran.

- **Heart-healthy fish.** Eat heart-healthy fish at least twice a week. Fish can be a good alternative to high-fat meats. Cod, tuna and halibut, for example, have less total fat, saturated fat and cholesterol than do meat and poultry. Fish such as salmon, mackerel and herring are rich in omega-3 fatty acids, which promote heart health by lowering blood fats called triglycerides. However, avoid fried fish and fish with high levels of mercury, such as tilefish, swordfish and king mackerel.
- **'Good' fats.** Foods containing monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats — such as avocados, almonds, pecans, walnuts, olives, and canola, olive and peanut oils — can help lower your cholesterol levels. Eat them sparingly, however, as all fats are high in calories.

Foods to avoid

Diabetes increases your risk of heart disease and stroke by accelerating the development of clogged and hardened arteries. Foods containing the following can work against your goal of a heart-healthy diet.

- **Saturated fats.** High-fat dairy products and animal proteins such as beef, hot dogs, sausage and bacon contain saturated fats. Get no more than 7 percent of your daily calories from saturated fat.
- **Trans fats.** These types of fats are found in processed snacks, baked goods, shortening and stick margarines and should be avoided completely.
- **Cholesterol.** Sources of cholesterol include high-fat dairy products and high-fat animal proteins, egg yolks, shellfish, liver and other organ meats. Aim for no more than 200 milligrams (mg) of cholesterol a day.
- **Sodium.** Aim for less than 2,000 mg of sodium a day.

Putting it all together: Creating a plan

There are a few different approaches to creating a diabetes diet that keeps your blood glucose level within a normal range. With a dietitian's help, you may find one or a combination of methods that works for you.

- **Counting carbohydrates.** Because carbohydrates break down into glucose, they have the greatest impact on your blood glucose level. It's important to make sure your timing and amount of carbohydrates are the same each day, especially if you take diabetes medications or insulin. Otherwise, your blood glucose level may fluctuate more.

A dietitian can teach you how to measure food portions and become an educated reader of food labels, paying special attention to serving size and carbohydrate content. If you're taking insulin, he or she can teach you how to count the amount of carbohydrates in each meal or snack and adjust your insulin dose accordingly.

- **The exchange system.** A dietitian may recommend using the exchange system, which groups foods into categories such as carbohydrates, meats and meat substitutes, and fats.

One serving in a group is called an "exchange." An exchange has about the same amount of carbohydrates, protein, fat and calories — and the same effect on your blood glucose — as a serving of every other food in that same group. So, for example, you could exchange — or trade — one small apple for 1/3 cup of cooked pasta, for one carbohydrate serving.

- **Glycemic index.** Some people who have diabetes use the glycemic index to select foods, especially carbohydrates. Foods with a high glycemic index are associated with greater increases in blood sugar than are foods with a low glycemic index. But low-index foods aren't necessarily healthier, as foods that are high in fat tend to have lower glycemic index values than do some healthier options.

A sample menu

Your daily meal plan should take into account your size as well as your physical activity level. The following menu is tailored for someone who needs 1,200 to 1,600 calories a day.

- **Breakfast.** Whole-wheat pancakes or waffles, one piece of fruit, 1 cup of low-fat milk.
- **Lunch.** Chicken kabob, 1/2 cup of steamed broccoli, 1/2 cup of cooked rice, 1/2 cup of juice.
- **Dinner.** Pasta primavera prepared with broccoli, carrots, zucchini, yellow squash and Parmesan cheese, 1 cup of low-fat milk.
- **Snacks.** Six homemade crispy corn tortilla chips, 1/2 cup fresh vegetables with a seasoned garlic sauce.

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- **Results**

- Embracing your healthy-eating plan is the best way to keep your blood glucose level under control and prevent diabetes complications. And if you need to lose weight, you can tailor it to your specific goals.
- Aside from managing your diabetes, a diabetes diet offers other benefits, too. Because a diabetes diet recommends generous amounts of fruits, vegetables and fiber, following one is likely to reduce your risk of cardiovascular diseases and certain types of cancer. And consuming low-fat dairy products can reduce your risk of low bone mass in the future.

- **Risks**

- If you have diabetes, it's important that you partner with your doctor and dietitian to create an eating plan that works for you. Healthy foods, portion control and scheduling are necessary to manage your blood glucose level. If you stray from your prescribed diet, you run the risk of fluctuating blood sugar levels and more-serious complications.

Source: <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/diabetes-diet/DA00027/NSECTIONGROUP=2>