

Diabetes Diet and Food Tips – November 7, 2011

Eating right is a key step to preventing and controlling diabetes. Fortunately, whether you're trying to reduce your risk of diabetes or manage a pre-existing problem, you can still enjoy your favorite foods and take pleasure from your meals. Your nutritional needs are the same as everyone else—no special foods or complicated diets are necessary. But if the way you eat has been less than healthy, you may need to learn some better eating habits. The key to a diabetes diet is eating in moderation, sticking to regular mealtimes, and eating a variety of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.

What you need to know about diabetes and diet

Diabetes is on the rise, yet most cases of diabetes are preventable with healthy lifestyle changes. Some can even be reversed. The bottom line is that you have more control over your health than you think. If you're concerned about diabetes, you can make a difference by eating a healthy diet, keeping your weight in check, and getting exercise.

Eating right for diabetes comes down to three things:

- **What you eat.** Your diet makes a huge difference!! You should eat mostly plant foods, cut back on refined carbs and sugary drinks, and choose healthy fats over unhealthy fats.
- **When you eat.** Diet is part of it, but keeping regular meal and snack times also affects your blood sugar levels and will help to keep them more constant.
- **How much you eat.** Portion sizes matter. Even if you eat very healthy meals, if you eat too much you will gain weight, which is a factor in diabetes.

You do not need to eat special foods, but instead simply emphasize vegetables, fruits, and whole grains. A diabetes diet is simply a healthy eating plan that is high in nutrients, low in fat, and moderate in calories. It is a healthy diet for anyone!

Myths and facts about eating to prevent or control diabetes

MYTH: You must avoid sugar at all costs.

Fact: The good news is that you can enjoy your favorite treats as long as you plan properly. The key when eating dessert or a sweet treat, is to make sure that it is part of a healthy meal plan, or combined with exercise.

MYTH: A high-protein diet is best.

Fact: Studies have shown that eating too much protein, especially animal protein, may actually cause insulin resistance, a key factor in diabetes. A healthy diet includes protein, carbohydrates, and fats. Our bodies need all three to function properly. The key is a balanced diet.

MYTH: You have to cut way down on carbs.

Fact: Again, the key is to eat a balanced diet. The serving size and the type you eat are especially important for carbohydrates. Focus on whole grain carbs since they are a good source of fiber and they are digested slowly, keeping blood sugar levels more even.

MYTH: You'll no longer be able to eat normally. You need special diabetic meals.

Fact: The principles of healthy eating are the same—whether or not you're trying to prevent or control diabetes. Expensive diabetic and “dietetic” foods generally offer no special benefit. You can easily eat with your family and friends if you eat in moderation

Diabetes and diet tip#1: Be smart about sweets

Eating for diabetes doesn't mean eliminating sugar. But in order to get the most enjoyment out of sweets, it is best to save them for special occasions. After all, they are called treats for a reason. If you have diabetes, you can still enjoy a small serving of your favorite dessert now and then. The key is moderation.

How to include sweets in a diabetes-friendly diet

Eating sweets at a meal adds extra carbohydrates. Because of this it is best to cut back on the other carb-containing foods at the same meal. Carbohydrate-rich foods include all flour products (i.e. bread, tortillas, crackers), rice, cereal, fruit, juice, potatoes, corn, etc. This will help you keep your blood glucose levels on track. Just keep in mind that these carbohydrate-rich foods have many nutrients your body needs, so don't substitute too often.

Tricks for cutting down on sugar

There are many ways to reduce your sugar consumption. Here are a few suggestions:

- **Make healthy substitutions.** Substitute sparkling water for soda, a bowl of frozen fruit instead of ice cream, one slice of your favorite cheese instead of cake, a piece of fruit instead of pie.
- **Clear your kitchen of sweets** and don't purchase them. Instead, you can enjoy a dessert when you are away from home.

- **Split dessert** with a friend when out and enjoying a treat.
- **Slowly savor each bite** when you do eat a treat.
- **Reduce or eliminate the amount of sugar called for in recipes.**

Your definition of sweet may change

As your eating habits become healthier, and you eat fewer sweets, your taste buds may shift. Foods that you used to love may seem too sweet. Instead healthier foods may become what you crave.

Diabetes and diet tip#2: Balance your carbs

Carbohydrates have a big impact on your blood sugar levels, but you don't have to avoid them. You just need to be smart about what types of carbs you eat and how you balance them in the rest of your diet.

Simple vs. complex carbs

Carbohydrates include simple sugars and complex starches and fibers. Your body breaks down carbohydrates into glucose (blood sugar), which is the fuel for your cells.

- **Simple carbohydrates:** Includes fruits and some vegetables, which in their natural form offer vitamins, minerals, and fiber. Simple carbs also include processed and refined foods, or “empty carbs,” with little nutritional value, such as soda, candy, snack foods, and white products such as white flour and white rice.

Choosing healthy carbs

[Click here](#) to download and print a guide to the glycemic index, a tool that helps you choose healthy carbs.

- **Complex carbohydrates** (also called slow-release carbs): Found in starchy vegetables, legumes, and whole grains such as whole grain brown rice, millet, quinoa and steel cut or rolled oats. Complex carbs take longer to digest, which helps you stay full longer and keeps your blood sugar level more even.

Tips for balancing carbohydrates

- Eat brown rice instead of white rice, steel-cut oats instead of processed cereals or instant oatmeal, or whole-grain bread instead of white bread.

- Balance your meals with all the food groups and make veggies the largest part of the meal. Eating carbs along with protein or a little fat helps reduce the impact on your blood sugar levels.
- Reduce how much soda and juice you drink. Switch to water or mineral water with a little juice mixed in instead.
- Eat sweet potatoes or winter squash instead of white potatoes.
- Choose a bran muffin over a croissant or pastry.

Why fiber matters

Fiber, also called roughage or bulk, is the part of plants that your body can't digest. Fiber is found in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, beans, nuts and seeds. In general, the more natural and unprocessed the food, the higher it is in fiber.

Fiber's role in preventing and controlling diabetes:

- Improves your blood sugar control and thus may reduce the risk of diabetes.
- Fiber intake is associated with a lower risk of heart disease.
- Fiber helps you feel full, so may even promote weight loss.

Diabetes and diet tip#3: Establish regular eating habits

Regular eating habits are especially important for diabetics. Your body is better able to regulate blood sugar levels—and your weight—when you maintain a regular meal schedule. Aim for moderate and consistent portion sizes for each meal or snack.

- **Don't skip breakfast.** Start your day off with a good breakfast. Eating breakfast every day will help you have energy as well as steady blood sugar levels.
- **Eat small meals at regular times.** It is helpful to eat 3 small meals plus 3 snacks spread out through the day. People tend to eat larger portions when they are overly hungry, so eating regularly will help you keep your portions in check.
- **Keep calorie intake the same.** Regulating the amount of calories you eat on a day-to-day basis has an impact on the regularity of your blood sugar levels. Try to eat roughly the same amount of calories every day, rather than overeating one day or at one meal, and then skimping on the next.
- **Listen to your body.** It takes a little time for your brain to get the message that you've had enough to eat, so stop eating when you feel 80% full. Wait 20 minutes. If you're still hungry, you can choose to have a little more.

Keep portion sizes under control

Making sure you do not eat too many calories is important in any healthy diet, but it is especially important for diabetics. Controlling your portion sizes is key to controlling calories:

- **Divide your plate into 3 parts:** $\frac{1}{2}$, $\frac{1}{4}$, $\frac{1}{4}$. Fill half of your plate with non-starchy veggies (greens, broccoli, cauliflower, mushrooms, peppers, carrots, turnips, etc.). Split the other half of your plate into two equal parts, filling one with protein and the other with a starchy carbohydrate (rice, potatoes, pasta, whole-grain bread).
- **Aim for a protein serving of around 3 oz.**, which is about the size of a deck of cards for meat. Animal protein is more calorie dense, so it is important to really pay attention to how much you are eating.
- **Keep servings of starchy carbs to $\frac{1}{2}$ cup.** One serving of starchy carbohydrate is $\frac{1}{2}$ cup cooked rice or pasta, which is about the size of half of a baseball.
- **Start your meals with veggies**, which will help fill you up and give you lots of nutrients.
- **Save half of restaurant meals for later.** When out at a restaurant, ask the server to put half the meal on your plate and pack the other half to go.
- **Read labels on foods**, so you can understand how many servings and portions are in items.



The road to lasting weight loss

If your last diet attempt wasn't a success, or life events have caused you to gain weight, don't be discouraged. The key is to find a plan that works with your body's individual needs so that you can avoid common diet pitfalls and instead make lasting lifestyle changes that can help you find long-term, weight loss success.

Read: [Healthy Weight Loss and Dieting: How to Lose Weight and Keep it Off](#)

Diabetes and diet tip #4: Choose fats wisely

Fats can be either helpful or harmful in your diet. People with diabetes are at higher risk for heart disease, so it is even more important to be smart about fats.

Some fats are unhealthy and others have some health benefits. But all fats are high in calories, so you should always watch your portion sizes.

- **Unhealthy fats** – The two most damaging fats are saturated fats and trans fats. Saturated fats are found mainly in animal products such as red meat, whole milk dairy products, and eggs. Trans fats, also called partially hydrogenated oils, are created by adding hydrogen to liquid vegetable oils to make them more solid and less likely to spoil—which is very good for food manufacturers, and very bad for you.
- **Healthy fats** – The best fats are unsaturated fats, which come from plant sources and are liquid at room temperature. Primary sources include olive oil, canola oil, nuts, and avocados. Also focus on omega-3 fatty acids, which fight inflammation and support brain and heart health. Good sources include salmon, tuna, and flaxseeds.

Ways to reduce unhealthy fats and add healthy fats:

- Instead of snacking on cheese, chips or crackers, enjoy a handful of nuts or seeds. Go for variety with sunflower, pumpkin seeds, almonds, cashews, pecans, and walnuts.
- Instead of cooking with butter or vegetable oil, use olive oil.
- Trim any visible fat off of meat before cooking and remove the skin before cooking chicken and turkey.
- Instead of frying, choose to grill, broil, bake, or stir-fry.
- Serve fish for 2 or 3 meals each week instead of red meat.
- Add avocado to your sandwiches instead of cheese. This will keep the creamy texture, but improve the health factor.
- When baking, use canola oil or apple sauce instead of shortening or butter.
- Find other ways to make soups creamy instead of using heavy cream. Try blending cooked potatoes in a soup, or adding a little cornstarch (mix with cold water then add to the soup). Then add a little swirl of good olive oil on top.

Diabetes and diet tip #5: Make your kitchen diabetes friendly

What you keep in your kitchen can either help or hurt your diabetes diet efforts. There are some foods that you should keep around and readily available and other foods that are best kept out of sight and out of your cupboards!

A 3-step plan for making your kitchen diabetes friendly:

Step 1: Out of sight, out of mind. Get rid of all the unhealthy, nutrient-scarce foods in your pantry, refrigerator, and cupboards. This includes cookies, pastries,

candies, sugary cereals, high-fat lunch and deli meats, fried foods, chips, cream-based foods, full-fat dairy products, juice, and sodas. When they aren't readily available, you will eat less of them.

Step 2: Organize your food storage spaces. Stock your kitchen so you can see what you have available to eat and cook with. Keep everything visible and easy to access, so you can better plan your meals and grab healthy snacks quickly.

Step 3: Stock up on healthy, appetizing foods.

- **Fruit** – Keep a large fruit bowl filled and in sight on a table or counter. Fruits are high in fiber and vitamins, plus they are colorful and pretty to look at. You can also keep frozen berries for smoothies or to add to yogurt. They also help curb your sweet tooth!
- **Vegetables** – Cut up vegetables, such as bell peppers, tomatoes, jicama, celery, and carrots, and keep them in plastic bags or containers for easy snack choices. They also taste great with hummus, a dip that has some protein and good fats in it. Also stock your freezer with your favorite veggies. This way you always have easy access to veggies to add to meals.
- **Nuts and seeds** – Keep a variety of nuts and seeds on hand. They stay nice and fresh when kept in the freezer or refrigerator. Add them to your morning cereal or have a little handful for a filling snack. Nut butters are also very satisfying and full of healthy fats.
- **Grains** – It is best to keep only slow release carbohydrates around. This means: grains such as brown rice, quinoa, millet, and pearled barley. Also stock up on whole grain, high-fiber cereals, breads, and pastas in your kitchen. You can line your shelves with glass jars filled with different varieties of grains.

Jicama: The perfect diabetes snack

Jicama, a type of tuber, is rich in slow-release carbohydrates. Jicama has a wonderful fresh, slightly sweet taste and crunch. Cut into pieces they can be dipped in hummus, guacamole, or salsa, or they can be marinated in lemon or lime and topped with spices (i.e. chili powder) or in orange juice and lemon juice.

Tips for sticking with a diabetes-friendly diet plan

First and foremost, take small, manageable steps. Choose two or three things you want to work on. Once you feel you have mastered those you can move on to two or three more steps towards a healthier diet. Here are some tips for making the transition easier and supporting yourself so you stick with these changes.

- **Pamper your senses.** Taste isn't the only sensory pleasure. Look to the other senses—touch, sound, smell, sight—for indulgence. Fill your house with plants and flowers, get a massage, take a long shower, listen to your favorite music, play with a pet, sit in the garden, or light scented candles. When you feel pampered and indulged, you are less likely to turn to food for comfort.
- **Eat with others.** Make meals a social experience. Increase the pleasure of the meal through the company and the whole experience, not just from the amount you eat. Be mindful about who you share your meals with and find those friend who encourage and support you in what you are aiming to do. If you have friends who are not a good influence around food, then you can choose to do other activities with them that don't involve eating.
- **Get enough rest.** If you're tired, your body will crave sugar and other quick energy fixes. This can easily lead to overeating, rising and falling blood sugar levels, and mood swings. Get to bed on time and try taking a short nap if you are overly exhausted.
- **Get to the root of your reasons for eating.** Ask yourself, am I hungry for food or am I feeling hunger for something else, such as comfort? If the latter, try getting comfort through other means. Ask for a hug from a loved one, curl up with a cup of hot tea and a great book or your favorite movie, light some candles and take a bubble bath, or call a friend who makes you laugh. There are many ways to satisfy your need for comfort that don't involve food. You just need to find what works for you.

Source: http://www.helpguide.org/life/healthy_diet_diabetes.htm