

Diabetes Research & Wellness Foundation

Healthy eating for diabetes

Dietary guidance for
people living with all
types of diabetes

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Staying well until a cure is found...

Healthy eating and diabetes

Everyone seems to have an opinion about diet. Magazines, friends and social media offer all sorts of information and this can sometimes be conflicting and confusing. How can you tell what is true and what is not?

Use this leaflet as your starting guide. It highlights three key messages that will help you make better food choices:

1. Choose healthier carbohydrates
2. Reduce intake of added sugars
3. Cut down on ultra-processed foods

What questions are on your mind?

Does diabetes mean I have to follow a special diet?

You don't need to buy expensive foods or follow a special diet plan. Eating for diabetes is simply about regularly eating a range of healthy foods, and this will benefit the whole family.



Will diabetes stop me eating with my family?

Can I still enjoy my favourite foods?

Why food matters

1. **What, when and how many carbohydrates you eat directly affects your blood glucose levels.** Persistently high blood glucose levels over a longer duration increase your risk of developing other long-term complications, for example heart disease.
2. **Eating well and having sensible portions can help you watch your weight.** Keeping to a healthy weight can reduce your risks of developing serious problems with your heart, eyes and feet. Long-term diabetes-related complications are linked more to glycaemic management than weight alone.
3. **Food is your body's fuel.** Eating regular balanced meals means you are more likely to have a range of important nutrients as well as steady energy levels throughout the day.

Your weight and diabetes

Even losing a small amount of weight can bring significant benefits, such as helping to lower blood pressure, reducing your risks of heart disease, improving insulin sensitivity and reducing insulin resistance. Keep healthier foods within easy reach, stay active, ask for support from friends and family, and get enough sleep. Reviewing your carbohydrate portion sizes can help you maintain a healthy weight and reduce your post-meal blood glucose rise.

If you are taking Glucagon-Like Peptide-1 (GLP-1) receptor agonists, your appetite is likely to be reduced. This means there is less opportunity for you to get all your essential nutrients, so choosing healthier meals becomes even more important. Enjoy nutrient-packed foods and make sure you have some protein (such as lean meat, fish, eggs, tofu or beans) at every meal.

If you are not overweight, it is important to eat a variety of healthy foods in the right amounts for you. Ask for a referral to a dietitian for support if you are losing weight unintentionally.

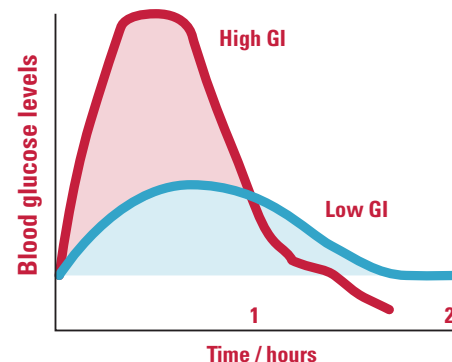
Key message 1: Choose healthier carbohydrates

Imagine certain foods as health heroes, loaded with things your body loves, like fibre, vitamins and minerals. These are the ones you should aim to enjoy more often. Fibre is found in many carbohydrates (carbs), such as wholegrain bread, brown rice and pasta, wholegrain breakfast cereals, fruit and vegetables, nuts, seeds and pulses (beans). Fibre is essential for gut health, keeping your digestive system working properly. Importantly in diabetes, certain types of fibre can help to manage your blood glucose levels by giving a slower and steadier rise.

Starchy carbs

All carbohydrates turn into glucose (sugar). Some, called high glycaemic index (high GI) foods, are broken down more quickly and can cause a spike in blood glucose. Others are broken down more slowly (low GI foods). Low GI foods are sometimes called slow-release foods. Making changes to your diet that help lower the overall GI of a meal or snack can help regulate blood glucose levels.

Lower GI carbohydrate foods eaten in the right portion sizes can help lower blood glucose levels, especially if eaten as part of a balanced meal.



Sourced from:
www.glycemicindex.com

Carbohydrate swap box

Choose these foods	instead of these foods
Wholegrain bread	White or wholemeal bread
Brown rice	White rice
Oatcakes	Rice cakes
Porridge (whole oats rather than sachets/pots)	Cornflakes
Wholemeal or coarse atta (chapati flour)	White atta
Roasted chana (chickpeas) or edamame	Bombay mix
Popcorn or lentil chips	Potato crisps
Chickpea hummus	Sour cream dip
A handful of unsalted nuts	Chocolate or yogurt-coated peanuts
Baked beans on wholegrain toast	Toasted cheese sandwich
Peanut butter	Spread and jam
Lentil dahl with brown basmati rice	Lamb curry with white rice

The type of fibre found in pulses such as beans and lentils, and grains like oats and barley is more slowly digested (*see table below*) and can provide a steadier source of energy and a slower rise in blood glucose levels. Seek support from a dietitian if you are making changes and you need help with carbohydrate counting.

Choose wholegrains

Oats, including rolled pinhead hulled
Barley, including hulled but not pearled
Brown and wild rice
Wheat grains, including cracked wheat, spelt and freekeh
Corn kernels
Rye
Millet
Buckwheat
Quinoa

Enjoy legumes

Chickpeas
Lentils
Beans, including black, cannellini, haricot, kidney beans
Butter and lima beans
Green peas
Cowpeas
Broad beans
Soya beans

Fruit and vegetables

Fruits and vegetables contain fibre, and are rich in vitamins and minerals, such as vitamin C and potassium. Studies show that eating more fruit and vegetables helps cut your risks of high blood pressure and strokes.

Aim for at least five portions of fruit and vegetables each day. Choose whole fruits rather than fruit juices and smoothies. More on this below. If you are carbohydrate counting, remember to count the carbs of any fruit eaten.



Five ways to add one more veg to your meals

Get into the habit of adding an extra portion of vegetables or a side salad to all your main meals. Here are five ideas to give you some inspiration.

1. Add broccoli, red onion, tomatoes or peppers to pasta.
2. Throw in a handful of red lentils, a can of beans or frozen peas when making soups, stews or curries.
3. Making rice? Mix in an equal amount of frozen mixed vegetables before cooking.
4. Add chickpeas or kidney beans to salad or rice dishes.
5. Add spinach leaves, onions, peppers or mushrooms when making an omelette.

What counts as a portion?

People are sometimes unsure about how much fruit and veg makes a portion. A typical portion is about 80 grams, and a helpful guideline is that a portion of fruit or vegetables should be roughly the size of what fits in your hand. For instance, one portion might be equivalent to a pear, a peach, two satsumas, an apple or a handful of berries.

Tinned, fresh and frozen all count. Limit dried fruit to 30g or a tablespoon amount as these are higher in natural sugars, because the water has been removed.

Check out the **More information** section for lists of fruit and vegetables that count as a portion.

Should you count carbs?

For people living with type 1 diabetes and people living with type 2 diabetes on insulin, matching quick-acting insulin to carbs is crucial for blood glucose management. Knowing the carb content in your food and drink helps you adjust quick-acting insulin accurately. Your diabetes team can teach you how to do this and factor in other variables, like exercise. They can also inform you about local education programmes.

Key message 2: Swap sugar for natural sweetness

High-sugar foods and drinks typically do not provide us with any essential vitamins and minerals and are therefore not necessary for a healthy diet. Living with diabetes does not rule out any food. However, it is important to eat fewer higher-sugar foods as they can have a quick, direct impact on blood glucose levels.

Foods with lots of sugar are usually processed and might also be high in fat – like chocolate, cakes, biscuits and puddings. It is better to enjoy naturally sweet-tasting foods that are less processed. For example, dried fruits such as raisins, apricots and dates bring sweetness in baking and also provide fibre goodness.

Sugar in liquid form like fruit juice or regular cola can make your blood glucose levels rise quickly. This can be useful in certain circumstances where a small amount (equivalent to 15g carbohydrate) is recommended for treating a hypoglycaemic episode (or hypo, when blood glucose levels are under 4mmol/l). Whole fruit is usually a better choice than fruit juice.

Is fruit juice okay?

Fruits contain natural sugars and when eaten as a whole fruit they also provide fibre, which helps slow down the rise in blood glucose levels. When fruit is juiced, we take out most of the fibre and this can make your blood glucose rise more quickly. Also, when fruit is taken in the form of juice, it is easier to have a larger amount of natural sugar than you would have if you had eaten whole fruits. This is why fruit juice can also be used as a first-line hypo treatment when you need your blood glucose levels to rise quickly.



For these reasons, it is recommended not to drink more than 150ml of unsweetened fruit juice or fruit-based smoothies per day. Adding vegetables instead of fruit to a smoothie can help boost fruit and veg intake and have less impact on blood glucose levels.

Eating well on a budget: three top tips



1 Avoid shopping when hungry and make a shopping list so you are less likely to buy on impulse.



2 Check for loyalty card deals and set a time limit when shopping.



3 Choose own-brand versions of products, in addition to buying discounted foods close to their use-by or best-before date.

Key message 3: Eat fewer ultra-processed foods

Ultra-processed foods (known as UPFs) often contain a long list of ingredients. Examples of these UPFs include crisps, biscuits, cakes, doughnuts, muffins, pastries, processed meats like sausages, burgers and hot dogs, as well as some ready meals. Many of these foods have ingredients that you might not use at home. They include additives, preservatives, emulsifiers, sweeteners, and artificial colours and flavours. Ingredients lists may also include added sugars, such as brown sugar, fruit nectar, dextrose and honey. Remember, they are all types of sugar and can affect your blood glucose levels.

Sometimes people pick these foods for the sake of convenience. It is okay to have them on occasion, but be aware that they do not add much nutritional goodness to your diet. Foods that are heavily processed tend also to be higher in unhealthy fats, sugar and salt and many are high in calories, so they can lead to weight gain. They can often be low in nutrients such as fibre, protein, vitamins and minerals. Processed meat and meat products have been linked to heart problems and some types of cancer. Choose healthier forms of protein such as fish, poultry, tofu, beans, lentils and dairy products. Healthier types of fat include avocados, oily fish, unsalted nuts and seeds.

Note that some foods that might be considered ultra-processed can actually provide important nutrients. Fortified wholegrain breakfast cereals are a good example as they provide iron, B vitamins and fibre. Choose lower-sugar versions and those with a shorter list of ingredients. Read food labels and check the ingredients list for any added sugars.

Healthy eating is about being mindful of the kind of foods you choose, how much you eat and how often you eat them.

UPFs are not to be feared. This is not about restricting – it is about reducing. If you are choosing ready meals, fast food or takeaways for example, be conscious of how much you have. Takeaway serving sizes can be larger than you need and are often higher in fat and calories – consider sharing and adding a side salad or some steamed vegetables to make your meal go further.

If you are trying to lose weight or improve your glycaemic control, aim to choose a ready meal that has less than 50g carbohydrate in total per meal. Try to choose foods that are less processed and keep to the recommended portion sizes on the pack. Get into the habit of looking at food labels and choose brands that are lower in fat, sugar and calories, yet still fit within your budget. Most supermarkets offer a healthier range of ready meals.

Try cooking from scratch with these speedy swaps:

Swap box

Choose these foods	instead of these foods
Grilled frozen fish with oven chips and peas.	Takeaway fish and chips
Beef pasta made with lean minced beef (or turkey/vegetarian alternative), a jar of tomato pasta sauce and wholemeal pasta. Add a side salad.	Lasagne ready meal
Apple wedges with nuts and 0%-fat Greek yogurt or yogurt alternative. A small amount of full fat yogurt is also okay as it helps slow down the release of sugars present in the fruit and with satiety.	Apple pie and cream
Grilled reduced-fat cheese, tomatoes, green peppers and olives on wholemeal pitta bread.	Three-cheese pizza
Baked jerk chicken with brown rice and peas.	Jamaican beef patty
Home-made popcorn with a touch of chilli and lemon.	Sweet chilli crisps

Staying healthy is not only about what you eat.

Physical activity and sleep also play a big role in managing stress and taking care of your body.



Remission of type 2 diabetes

Remission in type 2 diabetes means your blood glucose levels return to a healthy range without needing medication. It can be achieved through weight loss. Remission is an HbA_{1c} below 48mmol on two occasions, three months apart. Coming off diabetes medications will be dependent on whether medications are prescribed for other cardiac or renal protective benefits and not just improving glycaemic control, which helps restore normal liver and pancreas function, especially in those newly diagnosed. The NHS offers a structured remission (defined as coming off all glucose-lowering medication) programme, so ask your healthcare team if it is available in your area.

Key messages checklist:

People living with diabetes can still eat the same kind of food as people without diabetes. Here is a summary of the key messages in this leaflet:

1. Eat more high-fibre foods like beans, pulses, whole grains, fruit and vegetables.
2. Cut down on sugar-rich food and drink.
3. Choose fewer ultra-processed and takeaway foods and be mindful of portion sizes.

More information

There are diabetes education programmes available to you locally which will be offered when you are first diagnosed and possibly beyond. These may be face-to-face or online and will help improve your knowledge, skills and confidence in managing your diabetes, and to get your diabetes into remission. Alternatively, you can register for the NHS **Healthy living for type 2 diabetes** programme at www.healthyliving.nhs.uk, or attend a DRWF Diabetes Wellness Event, such as United Through Diabetes (www.drwf.org.uk/news-and-events/), which provides a one-stop shop on all aspects of diabetes self-management and an opportunity to meet new people living with all types of diabetes.

Need more help?

Talk to your diabetes specialist team or practice nurse and check out the further information below.

Cardiovascular disease

British Heart Foundation

bhf.org.uk/information-support/conditions/cardiovascular-disease

Managing your weight

NHS *Managing your weight*

www.nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-weight/

NHS Better Health *Lose weight*

www.nhs.uk/better-health/lose-weight/

Carb counting

Bertie bertiediabetes.com/

Carbs & Cals www.carbsandcals.com

Know Diabetes www.knowdiabetes.org.uk/resources/internal/carbohydrate-counting/

Eating a balanced diet

NHS *Eating a balanced diet*

www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/how-to-eat-a-balanced-diet/eating-a-balanced-diet/

British Dietetic Association food facts

www.bda.uk.com/food-health/food-facts.html

British Dietetic Association glycaemic index

www.bda.uk.com/resource/glycaemic-index.html

British Dietetic Association resource *Staying healthy when taking medications for obesity*

www.bda.uk.com/food-health/glp-1-obesity-medications.html

NHS Food Scanner app

www.nhs.uk/healthier-families/food-facts/nhs-food-scanner-app/

Diabetes remission

Life Without Diabetes: The definitive guide to understanding and reversing type 2 diabetes

by Professor Roy Taylor (Short Books Ltd, 2019)

Fruit and vegetables portion sizes

NHS *5 A Day portion sizes*

www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/5-a-day/portion-sizes/

Educational videos

All About Diabetes – the go-to channel for expert advice and practical tips on living well with diabetes by Hampshire and Isle of Wight Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust community diabetes team
www.youtube.com/@all-about-diabetes

NHS remission programme, weight management programme or community centre support groups in your area – ask your GP practice.



The Diabetes Research & Wellness Foundation works towards educating, informing and reminding you of the best and healthiest choices to make.

If you would like to become part of our Diabetes Wellness community, visit our website for more details.

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