

Food Fact - Diabetes - First Steps

The food choices we make can make a big difference to our health. Having diabetes doesn't have to mean denying yourself the foods you love, but food is an important part of diabetes management. Follow these tips to help enjoy a healthy diet.

1. Eat regular meals

Avoid skipping meals and space your breakfast, lunch and evening meal out over the day. This will help control your appetite and blood glucose levels.

2. Eat starchy carbohydrates

The **amount** of carbohydrate you eat is important, especially if you are managing your weight or blood glucose levels. Aim for a small portion (the size of your fist or 1/4 plate) at each meal. Starchy carbohydrates are lower GI and therefore will be slowly absorbed, reducing the likelihood of large spikes in your blood glucose levels after your meal. These foods include:

- **Starchy Vegetables** e.g. potatoes, corn,
- **Cereal based products** e.g. breakfast cereals + bread– choose the wholegrain options
- **Milk and milk based products** e.g. milk, yoghurt. Choose the low sugar and lower fat options.
- **Grains** e.g. pasta, rice, couscous. Choose the brown options where possible.
- **Pulses** e.g. lentils, kidney beans, baked beans, chick peas etc.
- **Fruit** - choose lower sugar options such as berries, rather than tropical fruits like bananas.

It's a good idea to limit the following foods as much as possible as they will spike your blood glucose due to their higher GI and being quickly absorbed.

- **Fruit juices or smoothies**– limit to 150mL per day.
- **Sugar** (all types) e.g. glucose, fructose, dextrose, syrup, honey etc.
- **Snack foods** e.g. Crisps, chips, buns
- **Cakes, biscuits and confectionary** e.g. sweets and chocolates
- **Pies and pastries** e.g. croissants, sweet and savoury pies

3. Cut down on fat

Ensure you eat a modest amount of fat, limit your intake of high fat foods, especially sources of saturated animal fat. Unsaturated fats from sources like olive oil, sunflower oil, rapeseed oil, nuts and avocados are better for your heart; however, if you are trying to lose weight be mindful of portion sizes as high fat foods are often higher in calories. A small handful of nuts (30g), for example, would be an appropriate portion size.

4. Try to eat five a day

Aim for 3 portions of vegetables and 2 of fruit. A portion is:

One piece of fruit like a small banana or an apple, a handful of grapes, a tablespoon of dried fruit , a small glass (150ml) of fruit juice , three heaped tablespoons of vegetables.

5. Eat plenty of beans

Beans, lentils and pulses are low in fat, high in fibre, cheap to buy and packed with nutrients. They don't have a big impact on blood glucose and may help to control blood fats such as cholesterol. Try kidney beans, chickpeas, green lentils, and even baked beans: hot in soups and casseroles, cold in salads, in baked falafel, bean burgers and low-fat hummus and dahls.

6. Eat more fish

All types of fish are healthy provided they're not coated in batter or fried, but oily fish such as mackerel, sardines, salmon and trout are particularly good for you. They are rich in omega-3 (polyunsaturated fat) which helps protect against heart disease. Aim to eat two portions (approximately 150g) of oily fish a week, ideally from a sustainable source. If you cannot eat fish, aim to include some omega-3 rich nuts and seeds, such as walnuts, flax, or chia seeds into your diet.

7. Cut back on sugar

Having diabetes does not mean you need to eat a sugar-free diet – but you may need to reduce the amount you eat. There are some easy ways to cut back on your sugar intake:

- Choose sugar-free, diet or no-added sugar drinks
- Buy canned fruit in juice, not in syrup and drain off the juice
- Cut out the sugar in your tea or coffee
- Read food labels and reduce your intake of high sugar foods
- Use sweeteners instead of sugar.

8. Cut down on salt

We need no more than 6g of salt per day (1 tsp). This can be obtained from the foods we eat and does not need to be added in cooking or at the table. Around 70 per cent of our salt intake comes from processed foods – so try to cut back on pre-prepared foods, and try adding flavor to your food with herbs and spices instead of salt.

9. Drink in moderation

To keep health risks from drinking alcohol to a low level, you are safest not regularly drinking more than 14 units of alcohol per week. These units should be spread this evenly over three days or more. For example, a single pub measure (25ml) of spirit is about 1 unit or half pint of lager, ale, bitter or cider has 1–1 1/2 units. Remember, alcohol is high in calories so think about cutting back further if you are trying to lose weight. Aim for at least 2 alcohol free days per week.

10. Be aware of portion sizes

It is not just what is on your plate, but how much. Are you checking your portions? Your plate should be half-filled with vegetables or salad, with the rest of the plate divided between protein foods such as meat, fish, eggs or beans and starchy carbohydrate foods. Portion control is vital for successfully managing diabetes.

11. Keep as active as possible

This will help to maintain a healthy weight and will help to control blood glucose levels. Regular exercise is important for helping manage diabetes.

12. Avoid diabetic foods

These products offer no benefit to people with diabetes and may still affect your blood glucose levels. They contain as much fat and calories as ordinary versions, are expensive and can have a laxative effect.

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