

Diabetes: Tips for Healthy Eating



Why is healthy eating important?

A healthy diet is important to manage diabetes. It helps you lose weight (if you need to) and keep it off. It gives you the nutrition and energy your body needs and helps prevent heart disease.

A healthy diet for diabetes doesn't mean that you have to eat special foods. You can eat what your family eats, including occasional sweets and other favorites. You do have to pay attention to how often you eat and how much you eat of certain foods. The right plan for you means meals that help you keep your blood sugar at healthy levels.

How do you know what to eat?

Try to eat a variety of foods and to be aware of which foods contain carbohydrate. Carbohydrate raises blood sugar higher and more quickly than any other nutrient does.

- A dietitian or diabetes educator can help you learn to keep track of how much carbohydrate you eat and how much you need.

- Spread carbohydrate throughout the day. Eat some carbohydrate at all meals, but do not eat too much at any one time. Carbohydrate is found in sugar, breads and cereals, fruit, starchy vegetables such as potatoes and corn, and milk and yogurt.
- Protein, fat, and fiber do not raise blood sugar as much as carbohydrate does. If you eat a lot of these nutrients in a meal, your blood sugar will rise more slowly than it would otherwise.
- Limit saturated fats, such as those from fatty meats, whole-milk dairy products, and butter. Instead, eat lean meat or grilled chicken and fish. Choose low-fat or nonfat milk, yogurt, and cheese. Replace butter or margarine with healthy oils, such as olive or canola oil. Replacing saturated fats with healthy oils is important to help lower your risk of heart disease. Because you have diabetes, your risk of heart disease is higher than average.
- Talk to your dietitian or diabetes educator about ways to include limited amounts of sweets in your meal plan. You can eat these foods now and then, as long as you include the amount of carbohydrate they have in your daily carbohydrate allowance.
- If you drink alcohol, limit it to no more than 1 drink a day for women and 2 drinks a day for men.

How do you plan meals?

A healthy diet includes a variety of foods, including:

- Grains, such as whole wheat bread, tortillas, or crackers, and oatmeal, brown rice, and pasta. Choose whole grains more often than refined grains. Refined grains include white rice or flour.
- Fruits, such as fresh, frozen, canned, or cooked apples, oranges, bananas, or berries.

- Dairy, such as nonfat or low-fat milk, yogurt, cheese, and cottage cheese. Choose plain or sugar-free yogurt.
- Protein, such as beef, chicken, turkey, fish, eggs, tofu, dried beans, and peanut butter.
- Vegetables, such as raw, frozen, canned, or cooked carrots, broccoli, or spinach.

A dietitian or diabetes educator can help you learn how to plan these foods into your meals and how much to eat at each meal. For meal planning, some people learn to count carbohydrate. Others find it easier to follow the plate format.

The plate format is a good, quick way to make sure that you have a balanced meal. It also helps you spread carbohydrate throughout the day. You divide your plate by types of foods. For example, at lunch or dinner you would put vegetables on half the plate, meat or meat substitutes on one-quarter of the plate, and a grain or starchy vegetable (such as brown rice or a potato) on the final quarter of the plate. To this you can add a small piece of fruit and 1 cup of milk or yogurt, depending on your carbohydrate goal for the meal.

When you eat out

- Learn to estimate the serving sizes of foods that have carbohydrate. If you measure food at home, it will be easier to estimate the amount in a serving of restaurant food.
- If the meal you order has too much carbohydrate (such as potatoes, corn, or baked beans), ask to have a low-carbohydrate food instead. Ask for a salad or green vegetables.
- If you eat more carbohydrate at a meal than you had planned, take a walk or do other exercise. This will help lower your blood sugar.

Questions to ask your doctor

Use the space below to list your questions or concerns. Take this sheet with you to your next doctor visit.

Questions about healthy eating for diabetes