



58

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Managing Diabetes Through Diet

A Practical Guide

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Diabetics can help control their condition by ensuring that they follow a proper diet. In this article, Dr Milton Maltz explains why you should try to include a good variety of foods to ensure you are getting the right amount of the nutrients and vitamins you need

1) Eat 3 meals a day

Everyone is encouraged to eat three meals a day, but for diabetics it can be particularly important. Eating regular balanced meals helps to support appetite regulation and maintain more stable blood glucose levels. Skipping meals can increase the risk of fluctuations in blood glucose, particularly for individuals taking insulin or some oral diabetes medications. Spacing breakfast, lunch, and dinner evenly throughout the day supports consistent energy intake and improved glycaemic control. Some individuals may also benefit from planned snacks, depending on their individual needs.

2) Include starchy carbohydrates

Starchy carbohydrates provide an important source of energy and nutrients and should be included as part of a balanced diet for diabetes. Examples include bread, pasta, potatoes, noodles, rice, and oats. The total amount and type of carbohydrate consumed have a significant impact on blood glucose levels. Choosing carbohydrates that are more slowly absorbed, often referred to as lower glycaemic index (GI) foods, can help reduce spikes in blood glucose after meals. Examples include oats, barley, quinoa, brown rice, chickpeas and lentils. High-fibre starchy foods also support digestive health and may help prevent constipation, while contributing to improved blood glucose and cholesterol management.

3) Cut down on saturated fats

Reducing overall fat intake, and especially saturated fat, supports cardiovascular health. This is particularly important for people with diabetes who are at higher risk of heart disease. Unsaturated fats, particularly monounsaturated fats such as olive oil, are healthier alternatives and should be used in small amounts. As fat is calorie-dense, reducing intake can also support weight management where appropriate. Small changes you can make to reduce your fat intake include:

- Consume less saturated fat by having less butter, margarine and cheese.
- Choose lean meat and fish as low fat alternatives to fatty meats.
- Choose lower fat dairy foods such as skimmed or semi-skimmed milk, low-fat yogurts, reduced fat cheese and lower fat spreads.
- Grill, steam or oven bake instead of frying or cooking with oil or butter.
- Choose tomato-based sauces instead of cream-based where possible.

4. Eat more fruit and vegetables

Fruit and vegetables provide essential vitamins, minerals, antioxidants and fibre. It's recommended that they make up just over 1/3 of the food you eat each day, or at least 5 portions. A portion is typically 80g, or 30g for dried fruits. Whole fruits and vegetables are generally more beneficial for your health than juices and smoothies, as they contain more fibre and have less significant impact on blood glucose levels.

5. Add legumes to your diet

Examples include kidney beans, butter beans, chickpeas or red and green lentils. They have less of an effect on your blood glucose levels and may help to control your blood fats. Try adding them to stews, casseroles and soups, or to a salad.

6. Eat at least 2 portions of oily fish per week

Oily fish, including mackerel, sardines, salmon, and pilchards, are rich in omega-3 polyunsaturated fats. These fats are associated with cardiovascular benefits and may help reduce the risk of heart disease. Aim to include at least two portions of fish per week, one of which should be oily.

7. Limit sugar intake

People with diabetes do not need to follow a completely sugar-free diet; however, foods and drinks high in added sugars should be limited, as they can cause rapid spikes in blood glucose and add excess calories with little nutritional value.

Using sugar-free, no-added-sugar, or diet versions of soft drinks and squashes can be a practical way to reduce overall sugar intake. Sugary foods should be eaten occasionally and in small portions, ideally as part of a meal rather than on their own.



8. Reduce salt in your diet

Excess salt intake can raise blood pressure, increasing the risk of heart disease and stroke. Aim to consume no more than 6 g of salt per day.

To reduce salt intake:

- Limit processed and fast foods, which are often high in salt.
- Check food labels and look out for any labels with RED salt sections.
- Flavour meals with herbs, spices, garlic, lemon, or vinegar instead of salt.

9. Limit your alcohol intake

Alcohol should only be consumed in moderation, with recommended limits of no more than 2 units per day for women, and 3 units per day for men. Alcohol is extremely calorie dense, and may hinder weight management. When drinking alcohol, it is preferable to drink alongside a meal. This is because drinking alcohol on an empty stomach can cause hypoglycaemia (low blood sugar), which can be dangerous.

10. Don't use diabetic foods or drinks

Foods especially advertised as 'diabetic' foods and drinks offer no nutritional advantage. They can still raise blood glucose levels, often contain similar amounts of fat and calories as standard products, may cause gastrointestinal side effects such as diarrhoea, and are usually more expensive.

11. Manage your weight

Achieving and maintaining a healthy weight can significantly improve blood glucose control and is one of the most effective treatments for Type 2 diabetes in individuals who are overweight. Even modest, sustained weight loss can lead to meaningful health benefits. Long-term lifestyle changes, rather than short-term 'fad' diets, are most effective.

12. Keep active

Regular physical activity improves insulin sensitivity by increasing glucose uptake into muscle cells, helping to lower blood glucose levels. Physical activity also supports weight management, cardiovascular health, and overall wellbeing.

Combining regular exercise with healthy eating and prescribed diabetes medication helps improve diabetes control and reduce the risk of long-term complications.