



Patient

Type 2 Diabetes Diet

The first-line treatment for type 2 diabetes involves making changes to your lifestyle, through diet, weight control and physical activity.

Medication for diabetes, whether in tablet or injection form, is definitely not the only way to control your blood sugar (glucose) levels.

The food you eat on a daily basis plays an important role in managing your diabetes, as well as ensuring you keep well and have enough energy for your daily activities. The same healthy eating principles apply whether you have diabetes or not. In fact, getting the whole family to eat this sort of balanced diet if you have diabetes can benefit their health as well as yours. Including foods from each of the main food groups described below will provide your body with the essential nutrients. See also separate leaflet called Healthy Eating.

Fruit and vegetables

Rich in fibre, vitamins and minerals. Low in calories and fat.

- Aim to eat at least five portions of fruit and vegetables per day.
- Try to 'eat a rainbow' - combine several different vegetables or fruits of different colours to get the maximum vitamins and minerals.
- These can be fresh, frozen, canned or dried (remember 30 g is a portion of dried fruit - some people can find it easy to eat too much).
- Limit your intake of fruit juice or smoothies to 150 ml per day, as these drinks have their fibre and carbohydrates already broken down. This means they can cause your blood sugars to rise more quickly. They are also very easy to drink so you can end up having too much, which means extra calories, carbohydrate and sugar!
- Remember that fruit contains natural sugars, which can put your blood sugar up - so control your portion size and try to spread your fruit intake throughout the day.

One portion is:

- one piece of medium-sized fruit (banana, apple, orange etc)
- two pieces of small fruit (satsumas, plums, kiwi fruit etc)
- one handful of grapes
- around 30grams of dried fruit (about 1 heaped tablespoon of raisins, two figs or three prunes)
- three heaped tablespoons of cooked vegetables, beans or pulses
- one medium onion or tomato
- one large sweet potato

Practical suggestions:

- Add sliced fruit or berries to porridge oats for breakfast.
- Prepare some chopped vegetables for an afternoon snack - for example, carrot, pepper or celery.
- Choose 2-3 vegetables to add to each meal you cook - for example, onions and pepper to a stir-fry or tomatoes and spinach to pasta.

Starchy carbohydrates

An important energy source and source of fibre. Carbohydrates are broken down by your body into glucose, which is used as fuel by your cells.

- Include some in your diet each day.
- Choose wholegrain alternatives where possible to increase the fibre content of foods - this slows down energy release which can help to keep you feeling fuller for longer - for example,

- multigrain/seeded bread.
- Control your portion size of these foods, as the more you eat, the greater the rise in your blood glucose levels.

Practical suggestions:

- Choose wholegrain cereals or wholegrain/seeded bread for breakfast.
- Try a baked potato or sweet potato with the skin left on for added fibre for lunch.
- Use wholemeal flour in baking and for breads such as chapattis or naans.
- Choose brown rice or brown pasta instead of white.

Dairy and dairy alternatives

Rich in calcium and other vitamins and minerals.

- Swap full-fat versions for lower-fat and sugar alternatives to reduce fat, sugar and calorie intake, and opt for unsweetened versions of dairy alternatives (for example, unsweetened almond or soy milk).

Practical suggestions:

- Choose semi-skimmed or skimmed milk rather than full-fat milk.
- Top fresh fruit with natural or low-fat Greek yoghurt for a healthy breakfast or snack idea.
- Top baked potatoes or wholegrain crackers with cottage cheese instead of a regular hard cheese.
- Grate cheese rather than using slices as you tend to eat smaller amounts this way.

Meats, fish, eggs, beans, pulses, nuts and other proteins

High in protein for building and repairing processes in the body. A source of iron. One portion of meat or fish is about the size of your palm

- Include this food group daily.
- Eat two portions of oily fish per week to promote heart health.
- Reduce intake of processed meat; choose leaner cuts of meat and try to replace meat with beans, pulses and lentils on some days. This will reduce fat and boost fibre intake.
- Whether you're vegetarian or not, try substituting tofu for meat in stir-fries and stews.

Practical suggestions:

- Eggs any way are a great way to start the day - boiled, scrambled, poached, dry fried or in an omelette.
- Grill meat, poultry, fish or meat alternative and serve with mixed vegetables for dinner.
- Snack on a handful of nuts and seeds if feeling hungry.
- Add extra beans and pulses to meals to add bulk or replace meats - for example, kidney beans, lentils, chickpeas.

Fluid

Keeps you hydrated.

- Aim to drink at least 6-8 glasses of fluid per day. Include plenty of non-fizzy and no-added-sugar drinks - water is best and is calorie-free!

Practical suggestions:

- Caffeinated drinks up to 400 mg caffeine a day (about eight cups of tea or four cups of coffee) don't carry health risks and can contribute to your daily fluid intake. If you're pregnant, you shouldn't have more than 200 mg caffeine a day.
- Beware the calorie count of your favourite full-fat latte!
- Always carry a bottle of water with you.
- Switch from full-sugar fizzy drinks to sugar-free alternatives - or better still, water.
- Drink 1-2 glasses of water 15 minutes before a meal to help with hydration and portion control.

Salt

- Lowering your intake can reduce blood pressure and risk of stroke and heart disease.
- Reduce intake of processed foods and ready meals which tend to have a high salt content.
- Prepare foods freshly where possible, as this gives you control of the amount of salt in the foods.

Practical suggestions:

- Remove the salt from the table to resist the temptation to add extra to foods before eating.
- Use other flavourings in cooking, such as dried herbs and spices - for example, paprika, cumin seeds, chilli flakes.
- Try to cook from fresh and make home-made sauces and marinades where possible.
- Limit your intake of processed meats like bacon and salami, which are high in salt.
- Choose low-salt stock cubes to use in soups, in gravy and for cooking.

Foods high in fat and sugar

While we all need some fat in our diets, most of us get far more than we need. High-sugar and high-fat food and drink can contribute to weight gain, and sugary foods can cause sharp rises in your blood glucose levels. If you do eat these foods, keep them as an occasional treat.

Practical suggestions:

- Reduce amount and swap type of fat to unsaturated alternatives such as vegetable, rapeseed or olive oil in cooking.
- Try swapping butter for an olive-based spread.
- Try using a spray oil instead, as you generally use less and some can be as low as 1 kcal per spray.
- Start looking at food labels and choose lower-fat varieties (less than 3 g total fat per 100 g and less than 1.5 g saturated fat per 100 g).

Which foods cause your blood glucose levels to rise?

All carbohydrates cause your blood sugar (glucose) levels to rise. This includes:

- Starchy carbohydrates, such as bread, rice, pasta, potatoes and cereals.
- Sugary carbohydrates found naturally in milk and fruit and in refined forms in sweets, chocolates and sugary drinks.

Starchy carbohydrates and foods containing natural sugars form part of a healthy balanced diet, so you should eat them daily. Be aware of and stick to the recommended portion sizes for these foods - the amount of carbohydrate you eat or drink determines how much your blood glucose levels rise.

What is the glycaemic index?

The glycaemic index (GI) of a food tells you how quickly the food is digested and absorbed, and how quickly your blood sugar (glucose) levels rise (low GI = slowly, high GI = quickly).

Foods with a lower GI release energy more slowly, helping you to feel fuller for longer. They also help reduce sharp fluctuations in blood glucose levels.

Healthy lower GI foods include pulses, beans, lentils, fruit and vegetables, and wholegrain starchy varieties.

The GI of foods should not be the only focus of your diet.

This is because unhealthy low GI options do exist - chocolate being an obvious example. You probably won't be surprised to hear that if you eat these in large quantities, lower GI foods will still cause a large rise in your blood glucose levels. The focus should remain on general healthy eating principles and portion control.

Why is food portion size important?

Controlling your portion size can be a really helpful way to stabilise or lose weight. It can also help you to manage your blood sugar (glucose) levels better. Top tips for portion control include:

- Use smaller-sized plates.
- Measure out portion sizes.
- Fill your plate with low-calorie food, such as salads and vegetables, before adding other types of food.
- Drink a glass or two of water about 15 minutes before a meal.
- Eat slowly. It takes about 20 minutes for your brain to register how much you've eaten, so if you eat fast you may have overeaten long before your brain tells you you're full.
- Don't do anything else while you're eating. Research shows we all tend to eat more if we're distracted (for example, watching television or playing on a computer).
- Resist the temptation to return for seconds.

Example portions: 2-3 tablespoons rice, pasta or cereals, 1 slice of bread, 30 g cheese, a palm-sized piece of meat/fish/poultry.

What are the benefits of weight loss if you're overweight?

Losing weight if you're overweight can greatly improve your blood sugar (glucose) levels. Losing weight can also help reduce your blood pressure and cholesterol levels. This in turn helps to reduce risk of stroke and heart disease.

Weight loss of 5-10% of your current body weight is enough to gain significant health benefits. Whether you lose weight through diet, physical activity or a combination of both, it doesn't matter. The key to success is finding out what works for you and sticking to it.

Do 'diabetic foods' need to be included in your diet?

Foods labelled as 'suitable for people with diabetes' on the supermarket shelves do not provide you with any special benefit above that of ordinary foods and so are not recommended. These foods are often more expensive, high in calories and still able to cause your blood sugar (glucose) levels to rise.

Five take home messages

- There is no such thing as a 'diabetic diet' - a normal, healthy and balanced diet is key!
- Your diet should be high in fibre with plenty of fruit and vegetables, low in fat (particularly saturated fat), low in sugar and low in salt.
- Be mindful of the portion size of foods you eat - portions which are too large can contribute to weight gain and lead to poorer management of blood sugar (glucose) levels.
- If you're overweight, aim for 5-10% weight loss - using a method you are likely to stick to.
- 'Diabetic foods' offer no additional benefit above 'normal' foods and so are not advised.

Further reading & references

- [Management of diabetes](#); Scottish Intercollegiate Guidelines Network - SIGN (March 2010 - updated Sept 2013)
- [Type 2 Diabetes Know Your Risk](#); Diabetes UK
- [Type 2 diabetes in adults: management](#); NICE Guidelines (December 2015, updated May 2017)
- [Diabetes - type 2](#); NICE CKS, July 2016 (UK access only)
- [Diabetes UK](#); Information prescriptions - living well.

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Document ID:
29888 (v1)

Peer Reviewer:
Dr Hayley Willacy
Last Checked:
15/07/2017

Next Review:
14/07/2020

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