

Healthy Eating and Diabetes

A healthy diet and daily exercise are key to everyone's health and wellbeing. But for people with diabetes, following a careful meal plan is especially important, because doing so helps keep the disease under control. In fact, the way a person with diabetes eats is just as important as his or her medication when it comes to controlling blood sugar and avoiding diabetes complications, such as blindness and kidney disease.

If you want to find the meal plan that will help the most with your diabetes, talk to a Registered Dietitian. Your dietary needs depend on factors such your age, sex, weight, and activity level. A dietitian can consider those factors, find out which foods you like, and come up with a diet that is both healthy and appetizing. Once that's done, you'll want to check in with him or her periodically to see if any adjustments need to be made.

Despite what you may have heard, having diabetes does not mean you have to give up tasty foods. The truth is, there is no such thing as a diabetic diet, and people with diabetes can eat the same foods a person without diabetes eats.

Whether or not you have diabetes, a healthy diet starts with the same basic ingredients:

- Whole grains, beans, fresh fruits, and vegetables;
- Some low-fat dairy products;
- A few servings of lean meats or meat substitutes; and
- Modest amounts of well selected fats.

Your Registered Dietitian can help you figure out the number of servings of each of these foods to include in your daily meal plan. He or she can also help you figure out how many calories you should have to best manage your weight.

The Carbohydrate Balancing Act

Carbohydrates, proteins, and fats are the three major nutrients found in all food. Carbohydrates affect blood sugar levels the most. As a result, eating too many carbohydrates at once can make your blood sugar skyrocket. Meanwhile, not eating enough carbohydrates can make your blood sugar drop.

Carbohydrate-rich foods include sweets, fruits, and juices; as well as rice, pasta, cereals, breads, beans, starchy vegetables, milk, and yogurt. To keep blood sugar levels as close to normal as possible, you'll have to spread out your intake of these foods throughout the day. For many people that means eating 3 to 4 servings of carbohydrate-containing foods with each meal, and 1 to 2 servings of carbohydrate-containing foods with each snack.

Your Registered Dietitian (RD) or Certified Diabetic Educator (CDE) may explain how you can keep track of carbohydrates by counting the number of grams of carbohydrates in each of the foods you eat. This technique, called "carbohydrate counting" can help you manage your diabetes and keep your blood sugar levels closer to normal. You'll learn that each serving of carbohydrate-containing foods should have 15 grams of carbohydrate.

Carbohydrate counting comes in handy if you choose to indulge in dessert. Your meal plan will give you a total carbohydrate allowance for each meal and snack. If you decide to have a piece of cake with 30 grams of carbohydrates in it, you can, but you'll need to give up 30 grams of carbohydrates elsewhere in your meal.

Types of Carbohydrates and Nutrition Labels

As soon as you start counting carbohydrates, you will notice that food labels often list total carbohydrates, sugars, and dietary fiber. These are different types of carbohydrates. Most people with diabetes need only focus on the total carbohydrate count. Don't pay attention to terms like "net carbs" or "net utilizable carbs." These terms are not well defined, and they are often misleading.

Sugar-Free, Low-Carb, Low Sugar: Don't Believe the Hype

Some food manufacturers claim that their foods are sugar-free or low in sugar or carbohydrates. None of these claims actually means that the food has **NO** carbohydrates. Still, people sometimes mistakenly believe that they can eat as much of these foods as they like. That's why it's so important to check the label for the total grams of carbohydrate per serving.

Foods that are labeled "sugar-free" can still contain carbohydrates. Often these foods contain "sugar alcohols" such as Sorbitol, Mannitol, or Xylitol. These sugar alcohols taste sweet and contain fewer calories than sugar but contain no alcohol. Nevertheless, they do contain calories and they can raise blood sugar.

When it comes to food labeled "low in sugar" or "low in carbohydrates," the story gets even more complicated. There is no universal standard of "low" or "high." Therefore, food manufacturers can put "low-sugar" or "low-carb" claims on foods in just the same way as they might label them as "delicious." Would you believe a food was delicious just because it said so on the label?

A Health Coach Can Help

If you have diabetes and have questions about managing your diet, a Health Coach can help. Health Coaches are specially trained healthcare professionals, such as nurses, dietitians, and respiratory therapists. They are available by phone, anytime, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, at no charge to you. To talk to a Health Coach, call **1-800-658-2750**. You can also get information online at www.thedialogcenter.com/bcbsnd.