Eating well with diabetes
What is diabetes?

Diabetes mellitus is a condition in which the amount of glucose (sugar) in the blood is too high because the body cannot use it properly. Glucose comes from the digestion of starchy foods such as bread, rice, potatoes, chapatis, yams and plantain, from sugar and other sweet foods, and from the liver which makes glucose.

Insulin is vital for life. It is a hormone produced by the pancreas, which helps the glucose to enter the cells where it is used as fuel by the body. The main symptoms of untreated diabetes are increased thirst, going to the loo all the time – especially at night, extreme tiredness, weight loss, genital itching or regular episodes of thrush, slow healing wounds and blurred vision.

Type 1 diabetes develops if the body is unable to produce any insulin. This type of diabetes usually appears before the age of 40. It is treated by insulin injections and diet and regular physical activity.

Type 2 diabetes develops when the body can still make some insulin, but not enough, or when the insulin that is produced does not work properly (known as insulin resistance). This type of diabetes usually appears in people over the age of 40. In most cases this is linked with being overweight. This type of diabetes usually appears in people over the age of 40, though in South Asian and African-Caribbean people often appears after the age of 25. However, recently, more children are being diagnosed with the condition, some as young as seven. Type 2 diabetes is treated with lifestyle changes such as a healthier diet, weight loss and increased physical activity. Tablets and/or insulin may also be required to achieve normal blood glucose levels.

The main aim of treatment of both types of diabetes is to achieve blood glucose, blood pressure and cholesterol levels as near to normal as possible. This, together with a healthy lifestyle, will help to improve wellbeing and protect against long-term damage to the eyes, kidneys, nerves, heart and major arteries.
Introduction

Balancing your diet when you are diagnosed with diabetes can be challenging. Although the food choices you make and your eating habits are important in helping you manage your diabetes, you should be able to continue enjoying a wide variety of foods as part of healthy eating.

Eating a balanced diet, managing your weight, and following a healthy lifestyle, together with taking any prescribed medication and monitoring where appropriate will benefit your health enormously.

Remember, in the long run it is better to make small changes that you feel you can stick to rather than completely altering your diet and not sticking to it.

Taking steps to balance your diet, as outlined in this leaflet, will help you control your:

- blood glucose levels
- blood fats – cholesterol and triglycerides
- blood pressure

It will also help regulate your weight. If you are overweight losing weight will help you control your diabetes and will also reduce your risk of heart disease, high blood pressure and stroke.

You are sure to have lots of questions about your diet. We've tried to answer the most commonly asked questions in this leaflet. A registered dietitian will be able to answer any additional questions. Diabetes UK recommends that everyone with diabetes should see a registered dietitian at diagnosis, and then have regular reviews for specific advice on their eating habits.
Ten steps to eating well

1. **Eat three regular meals a day.** Avoid skipping meals and spread your breakfast, lunch and evening meal over the day. This will not only help control your appetite but also help in controlling your blood glucose levels.

2. **At each meal include starchy carbohydrate foods.** Such as bread, pasta, chapattis, potatoes, yam, noodles, rice and cereals. The amount of carbohydrate you eat is important to control your blood glucose levels (see page 10 and 11 for more information). All varieties are fine but try to include those that are more slowly absorbed (have a lower glycaemic index) as these won’t affect your blood glucose levels as much. Better choices include:
   - Pasta
   - Basmati or easy cook rice
   - Grainy breads such as granary, pumpernickel and rye
   - New potatoes, sweet potato and yam
   - Porridge oats, all bran and bran flakes.

The high fibre varieties of starchy foods will also help to maintain the health of your digestive system and prevent problems such as constipation.
Cut down on the fat you eat, particularly saturated fats as this type of fat is linked to heart disease. Choose unsaturated fats or oils, especially monounsaturated fat (eg olive oil and rapeseed oil) as these types of fats are better for your heart. All fats contain calories. Fat is the greatest source of calories so eating less fat and fatty foods will help you to lose weight. Here are some tips to cutting the fat:

- Use less saturated fat by having less butter, margarine, cheese and fatty meats.
- Choose lower fat dairy foods such as skimmed or semi-skimmed milk, low fat or diet yogurts, reduced fat cheese and lower fat spreads.
- Grill, steam or oven bake instead of frying or cooking with oil or other fats.
- Watch out for creamy sauces and dressings and swap for tomato based sauces instead.

Eat more fruit and vegetables. Aim for at least five servings in total a day to provide you with vitamins and fibre as well as to help you balance your overall diet. A portion is for example

- a whole banana or apple
- a slice of melon
- two plums
- a handful of grapes
- a cereal bowl of salad
- three heaped tablespoons of vegetables.
5. **Include more beans and lentils** such as kidney beans, butter beans, chickpeas, red and green lentils, as these can help to control your blood glucose levels and blood fats. Try adding them to stews, casseroles and soups, or to a salad.

6. **Aim for at least two portions of oily fish a week.** Oily fish contains a type of polyunsaturated fat called omega 3 which helps protect against heart disease. Eat oily fish such as mackerel, sardines, salmon and pilchards.

7. **Limit sugar and sugary foods.** This does not mean you need to eat a sugar-free diet. Sugar can be used in foods and in baking as part of a healthy diet. However, use sugar-free, no added sugar or diet squashes and fizzy drinks, as sugary drinks cause blood glucose levels to rise quickly.

8. **Reduce salt in your diet to 6g or less a day** – more than this can raise your blood pressure, which can lead to stroke and heart disease. Limit the amount of processed foods you eat and try flavouring foods with herbs and spices instead of salt.
Drink alcohol in moderation only – that’s a maximum of two units of alcohol per day for a woman and three units per day for a man. For example, a pub measure (25ml) of spirit or half a pint of normal strength beer is about one unit. Over the years, the alcohol content of most drinks has gone up. A drink can now contain more units than you think – a pint of premium lager can contain as much as 3 units, and a small glass of wine (175ml) around 2 units. Remember alcohol contains empty calories so think about cutting back further if you are trying to lose weight. Never drink on an empty stomach, as alcohol can make hypoglycaemia (low blood glucose levels) more likely to occur when taking certain diabetes medication. Never drink and drive.

Don’t be tempted by diabetic foods or drinks. They offer no benefit to people with diabetes. They:

- Are expensive
- Contain just as much fat and calories as the ordinary versions
- Can have a laxative effect
- Will still affect your blood glucose levels

Lose weight slowly over time (1–2lbs per week) rather than crash dieting. Even if you don’t manage your ideal weight, losing a small amount and keeping it off will help your blood glucose and blood pressure control and improve your overall health.