Eating well with Type 2 diabetes
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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.
Introduction

This booklet provides general guidance about food choices if you have Type 2 diabetes. Balancing your diet when you have Type 2 diabetes can be challenging but it is important. Making sensible food choices and adapting your eating habits will help you manage your diabetes and help protect your long-term health. Whether you have the condition, or know or care for somebody with Type 2 diabetes, we hope this information will be helpful.

Taking steps to balance your diet, as outlined in this booklet, will help you control your blood glucose levels, blood fats including cholesterol, and blood pressure. This booklet is also a good starting point if you need to think about losing weight.

You're likely to have lots of questions about your diet and we've tried to answer those most commonly asked in this leaflet. A registered dietitian will be able to answer any further questions.

Your diet and diabetes

What is Type 2 diabetes?

Diabetes is a common, life-long condition where the amount of glucose (sugar) in the blood is too high as it cannot be used properly. Glucose comes from the digestion of foods containing carbohydrate and from the liver which makes glucose.

Insulin is vital for life. It is a hormone produced by the pancreas, that helps the glucose to enter the cells where it is used as fuel by the body. 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).

Good blood glucose control is important in the management of diabetes. Because of the link between eating carbohydrate and blood glucose levels, we have answered some common questions about carbohydrate on the following pages.
What is carbohydrate?
Carbohydrate can be classified in a number of different ways but essentially there are two main types, starchy carbohydrates and sugars.

**Starchy carbohydrates** include foods like bread, pasta, chapatis, potatoes, yam, noodles, rice and cereals.

**Sugars** include table sugar (eg, caster, white, brown), and can also be found in fruit (fructose), and some dairy foods (lactose). They can often be identified on food labels as those ingredients ending with -ose.

Why is carbohydrate important?
All carbohydrate is converted into glucose and will have an impact on blood glucose levels. As this is the case, some people with diabetes wonder if it would be better not to have any carbohydrate in their diet to keep their glucose levels under control. This is not recommended as:

- glucose from carbohydrate is essential to the body, especially the brain
- high fibre carbohydrates, such as wholegrains and fruit, also play an important role in the health of the gut
- some carbohydrates may help you to feel fuller for longer after eating.

How much do I need?
The actual amount of carbohydrate that the body needs varies depending on your age, weight and activity levels, but it should make up about half of what you eat and drink. For good health most of this should be from starchy carbohydrate, fruits and some dairy foods, with no more than one fifth of your total carbohydrate to come from added sugar or table sugar. (See pages 11–13 for a clearer guide.)
Ten steps to eating well

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

2. At each meal include starchy carbohydrate foods such as bread, pasta, chapatis, potatoes, yam, noodles, rice and cereals. The amount of carbohydrate you eat is important to control your blood glucose levels. Especially 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 natural muesli. The high fibre varieties of starchy foods will also help to maintain the health of your digestive system and prevent problems such as constipation.

3. Cut down on the fat you eat, particularly saturated fats, as a low fat diet benefits health. Choose unsaturated fats or oils, especially monounsaturated fat (eg olive oil and rapeseed oil) as these types of fats are better for your heart. As fat is the greatest source of calories, eating less fat will help you to lose weight if you need to. To cut down on the fat you eat, here are some tips:
   - Use 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 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 use tomato-based sauces instead.

4 Eat more fruit and vegetables. Aim for at least five portions a day to provide you with vitamins, minerals and fibre to help you to balance your overall diet. One portion is, for example, a banana or apple, a handful of grapes, a tablespoon of dried fruit, a small glass of fruit juice or fruit smoothie, three heaped tablespoons of vegetables or a cereal bowl of salad.

5 Include more beans and lentils such as kidney beans, butter beans, chickpeas or red and green lentils. These 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 Aim for at least two portions of oily fish a week. Examples include mackerel, sardines, salmon and pilchards. Oily fish contains a type of polyunsaturated fat called omega 3 which helps protect against heart disease.

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. Using sugar-free, no added sugar or diet fizzy drinks/squashes, instead of sugary versions can be an easy way to reduce the sugar in your diet.
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 (as these are usually high in salt) and try flavouring foods with herbs and spices instead of salt.

9 Drink alcohol in moderation only – that’s a maximum of 2 units of alcohol per day for a woman and 3 units per day for a man. For example, a single pub measure (25ml) of spirit is about 1 unit or half a pint of lager, ale, bitter or cider has 1-1 ½ units. Over the years the alcohol content of most drinks has gone up. A drink can now contain more units than you think – a small glass of wine (175ml) could contain as much as 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.

10 Don’t use diabetic foods or drinks. They offer no benefit to people with diabetes. They will still affect your blood glucose levels, contain just as much fat and calories as the ordinary versions, can have a laxative effect and are expensive.
Your questions answered

**Q**
Can I still have some sugar in my diet?

**A**
Yes. Eating sugar doesn't cause diabetes and people with diabetes do not need to have a sugar-free diet. It's okay to have foods like chocolate and cakes occasionally alongside a healthy diet. Remember sugary foods provide empty calories.

**Q**
I'd like to use a sweetener instead of sugar in my tea but I've heard that they aren't safe. Is this true?

**A**
All sweeteners have to undergo rigorous safety tests before they can be sold in the UK. The government sets safe limits and surveys groups of individuals to see whether they are exceeding these limits. At the moment there is no evidence to suggest that the general public is exceeding these safe limits, but if you are at all concerned then you can minimise this risk by using a variety of sweeteners.

**Q**
Is it true that I shouldn't eat bananas or grapes?

**A**
No. All fruit is good for you. Eating more fruit can reduce the risk of heart disease, some cancers and some gut problems. Eat a variety of different fruit and vegetables for maximum benefit.
Does a smoothie count towards my fruit and veg target?

Yes, a smoothie can be an easy way to notch up a portion of fruit. The good news is that if, for example, you put two whole pieces of fruit into a homemade smoothie then it can count as two portions. Remember that some smoothies contain added sugar, honey, yogurt or milk that can bump up the calories, fat or sugar content so check the ingredients label.

Can people with diabetes follow a vegetarian diet?

Yes. Although, following a vegetarian diet does not necessarily mean a healthier diet. You still need to have a good balance of different foods. To make sure you are following a healthy balanced vegetarian diet contact The Vegetarian Society (details on page 22).

Is it ok for me to take a vitamin supplement now that I have diabetes?

Diabetes UK does not recommend that people with diabetes take a supplement. If your diet is deficient in some nutrients then you may benefit from taking one, but this should be decided in conjunction with your doctor and/or dietitian. (Note: Women with diabetes should take a supplement of 5mg of folic acid when planning pregnancy and continue to take it until the end of the 12th week of pregnancy. This dose of folic acid is only available on prescription.)