

Diet and Diabetes

Recipes for Success

Diabetes Basics In the past few years, much of what we thought we knew about diabetes has been turned on its head. New understanding of the nutritional causes of diabetes gives us the power to keep it from occurring or to turn it around.

Here is what is supposed to happen: Our bodies turn starchy and sweet foods into glucose for our muscle cells to use for fuel. Insulin, a hormone made in the pancreas, ushers glucose into the cells. People with type 2 diabetes, the most common type, generally have enough insulin. However, their cells become resistant to it, leaving too much glucose in the bloodstream, where it can cause problems.

Over the short run, people with uncontrolled diabetes may feel tired, thirsty, urinate frequently, and notice blurred vision. In the long run, they are at risk for heart disease, kidney problems, vision loss, nerve damage, and other difficulties.

Dietary Approaches to Diabetes

Diabetes diets typically call for portion control, carbohydrate limits and, for those who are overweight, calorie restrictions. Fortunately, there is another way. Low-fat, plant-based diets are ideal for diabetes and the conditions associated with it, such as heart disease, weight gain, high cholesterol, and high blood pressure. And, they offer the nice advantage of not requiring any weighing or measuring of portions. Going hungry is not necessary!

The old approach had us cutting down on carbohydrates. It's true that overly processed carbohydrates—those made with sugar or white flour, for example—are poor choices. However, delicious unprocessed or minimally-processed foods, such as potatoes, rice, oats, beans, pasta, fruit, and vegetables, were the main part of the diet in countries where people were traditionally fit and trim and where diabetes was rare. Unfortunately, highly processed carbohydrates and affordable meat and cheese dishes have moved in, and now we have a worldwide type 2 diabetes epidemic.

A low-fat vegetarian approach recognizes that whole-food carbohydrates are fine; it's the fat in our diets that is the problem. New information suggests that fat in animal products and oils interferes with insulin's ability to move glucose into the cells.¹ Eating less fat reduces body fat. Less body fat allows insulin to do its job. However, choosing skinless chicken, skim milk and baked fish is not enough of a change for most people to beat diabetes.

The new approach eliminates fatty foods and animal protein, such as meats, dairy products, and oils, and offers unlimited grains, legumes, fruits, and vegetables. One study found that 21 of 23 patients on oral medications and 13 of 17 patients on insulin were able to get off of their medications after 26 days on a near-vegetarian diet and exercise program.² During two- and three-year follow-ups, most people with diabetes treated with this regimen have retained their gains.³ The dietary changes are simple, but profound, and they work.

A 2006 study, conducted by the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine with the George Washington University and the University of Toronto, looked at the health benefits of a low-fat, unrefined, vegan diet (excluding all animal products) in people with type 2 diabetes.⁴ Portions of vegetables, grains, fruits, and legumes were unlimited. The vegan diet group was compared with a group following a portion-controlled, higher-fat diet based on American Diabetes Association (ADA) guidelines. The results of this 22-week study were astounding:

- Forty-three percent of the vegan group and 26 percent of the ADA group reduced their diabetes medications. Among those whose medications remained constant, the vegan group lowered hemoglobin A1C, an index of long-term blood glucose control, by 1.2 points, three times the change in the ADA group.

- The vegan group lost an average of about 13 pounds, compared with about 9 pounds in the ADA group.
- Among those participants who didn't change their lipid-lowering medications, the vegan group also had more substantial decreases in their total and LDL cholesterol levels compared to the ADA group. This study illustrates that a plant-based diet can dramatically improve the health of people with diabetes. It also shows that people found this way of eating highly acceptable and easy to follow.

Type 1 Diabetes and Diet

While people with type 2 diabetes can often reduce, and sometimes eliminate, medications when they lose weight and food and exercise are better controlled, those with type 1 diabetes will always need insulin. Even so, a good diet can minimize the amount of insulin required. Type 1 diabetes, formerly called "childhood onset diabetes," occurs when the pancreas stops producing insulin. The cause of type 1 diabetes remains elusive. Several studies have implicated cow's milk consumption as a possible contributor.^{5,6} When milk consumption patterns were examined across various nations, there was a strong correlation with the incidence of type 1 diabetes. It may be that milk proteins cause an autoimmune reaction in which the body mistakenly attacks its own insulin-producing cells. For this reason, among others, the American Academy of Pediatrics no longer recommends unmodified cow's milk for infants. When breast-feeding women ingest dairy products, the cow's milk proteins end up in their own breast milk. For this reason, breastfeeding mothers may do well to avoid cow's milk until more research is completed.

The Remarkably-Simple New Dietary Approach to Diabetes: Give it a 3-Week Trial. What Have You Got to Lose?

1. Begin a Vegan Diet: Avoid Animal Products.

A vegan diet has no animal products at all: No red meat, poultry, pork, fish, dairy products, and eggs. Why? Animal products contain saturated fat, which is linked to heart disease, insulin resistance, and certain forms of cancer. They also contain cholesterol and, of course, animal protein. It may surprise you to learn that diets high in animal protein can aggravate kidney problems and calcium losses. All the protein you need can be found in whole grains, legumes, and even vegetables: that's where strong horses, bulls, and elephants get their protein.

2. Avoid Added Vegetable Oils and Other High-Fat Foods.

Although vegetable oils are healthier than animal fats, you will still want to keep them to a minimum. All fats and oils are highly concentrated in calories. A gram of any fat or oil contains nine calories, compared with only four calories for a gram of carbohydrate. The amount of fat we really need each day is quite small and readily available by eating whole foods.

Avoid oily toppings and foods fried in oil. Limit olives, avocados, nuts, and peanut butter. Read labels, and choose foods with no more than 2–3 grams of fat per serving.

3. Favor Foods with a Low Glycemic Index.

The glycemic index identifies foods that increase blood sugar rapidly. Favor foods that have much less effect on blood sugar.

4. Go High-Fiber.

Aim for at least 40 grams of fiber each day. Choose beans, vegetables, fruits, and whole grains (e.g., whole wheat pasta, barley, oats, quinoa). Aim for at least 3 grams/fiber per serving on labels and 10 to 15 grams per meal. Start slowly. Expect a change in bowel habits (usually for the better). Gassiness from beans can be minimized with small servings and thorough cooking.

5. Focus on the "New Four Food Groups."

Enjoy unlimited whole grains, legumes (beans, lentils, peas), fruits and vegetables. Modest amounts of nonfat condiments, salad dressings, nuts, and seeds also fine. See the resources below for more information.

A note on vitamin B12: Those following a diet free of animal products should take a B12 supplement of 5 micrograms per day. Any common daily multiple vitamin will provide this amount.