

[healthy eating](#)

## The Diabetes Diet

**Healthy eating can help you prevent, control, and even reverse diabetes. And with these tips, you can still enjoy your food without feeling hungry or deprived.**



### What's the best diet for diabetes?

Whether you're trying to prevent or control diabetes, your nutritional needs are virtually the same as everyone else, so no special foods are necessary. But you do need to pay attention to some of your food choices—most notably the carbohydrates you eat. While following a [Mediterranean](#) or other [heart-healthy diet](#) can help with this, the most important thing you can do is to lose a little weight.

Losing just 5% to 10% of your total weight can help you lower your blood sugar, [blood pressure](#), and cholesterol levels. Losing weight and eating healthier can also have a profound effect on your mood, energy, and sense of wellbeing. People with diabetes have nearly double the risk of heart disease and are at a greater risk of developing mental health disorders such as depression.

But most cases of type 2 diabetes are preventable and some can even be reversed. Even if you've already developed diabetes, it's not too late to make a positive change. By eating healthier, being more physically active, and losing weight, you can reduce your symptoms. Taking steps to prevent or control diabetes doesn't mean living in deprivation; it means eating a tasty, balanced diet that will also boost your energy and improve your mood. You don't have to give up sweets entirely or resign yourself to a lifetime of bland food.

## **The biggest risk for diabetes: belly fat**

Being overweight or obese is the biggest risk factor for type 2 diabetes. However, your risk is higher if you tend to carry your weight around your abdomen as opposed to your hips and thighs. A lot of belly fat surrounds the abdominal organs and liver and is closely linked to insulin resistance. You are at an increased risk of developing diabetes if you are:

- A woman with a waist circumference of 35 inches or more
- A man with a waist circumference of 40 inches or more

Calories obtained from fructose (found in sugary beverages such as soda, energy and sports drinks, coffee drinks, and processed foods like doughnuts, muffins, cereal, candy and granola bars) are more likely to add weight around your abdomen. Cutting back on sugary foods can mean a slimmer waistline as well as a lower risk of diabetes.

## **Planning a diabetes diet**

A diabetic diet doesn't have to be complicated and you don't have to give up all your favorite foods. The first step to making smarter choices is to separate the myths from the facts about eating to prevent or control diabetes.

Myths and facts about diabetes and diet

**Myth: You must avoid sugar at all costs.**

**Fact:** You can enjoy your favorite treats as long as you plan properly and limit hidden sugars. Dessert doesn't have to be off limits, as long as it's a part of a healthy meal plan.

Myths and facts about diabetes and diet

**Myth: You have to cut way down on carbs.**

**Fact:** The [type of carbohydrates](#) you eat as well as serving size is key. Focus on whole grain carbs instead of starchy carbs since they're high in fiber and digested slowly, keeping blood sugar levels more even.

**Myth: You'll need special diabetic meals.**

**Fact:** The principles of healthy eating are the same—whether or not you're diabetic. Expensive diabetic foods generally offer no special benefit.

**Myth: A high-protein diet is best.**

**Fact:** Studies have shown that eating too much [protein](#), especially animal protein, may actually cause insulin resistance, a key factor in diabetes. A healthy diet includes protein, carbohydrates, and fats. Our bodies need all three to function properly. The key is a balanced diet.

As with any healthy eating program, a diabetic diet is more about your overall dietary pattern rather than obsessing over specific foods. Aim to eat more natural, unprocessed food and less packaged and convenience foods.

## Eat more

- Healthy fats from nuts, olive oil, fish oils, flax seeds, or avocados.
- Fruits and vegetables—ideally fresh, the more colorful the better; whole fruit rather than juices.
- High-fiber cereals and breads made from whole grains.
- Fish and shellfish, organic chicken or turkey.
- High-quality protein such as eggs, beans, low-fat dairy, and unsweetened yogurt.

## Eat less

- Packaged and fast foods, especially those high in sugar, baked goods, sweets, chips, desserts.
- White bread, sugary cereals, refined pastas or rice.
- Processed meat and red meat.
- Low-fat products that have replaced fat with added sugar, such as fat-free yogurt.

## Choose high-fiber, slow-release carbs

Carbohydrates have a big impact on your blood sugar levels—more so than fats and proteins—so you need to be smart about what types of carbs you eat. [Limit refined](#)

[carbohydrates](#) like white bread, pasta, and rice, as well as soda, candy, packaged meals, and snack foods. Focus on [high-fiber](#) complex carbohydrates—also known as slow-release carbs. They are digested more slowly, thus preventing your body from producing too much insulin.

## What about the glycemic index?

High glycemic index (GI) foods spike your blood sugar rapidly, while low GI foods have the least effect on blood sugar. While the GI has long been promoted as a tool to help manage blood sugar, there are some notable drawbacks.

- The true health benefits of using the GI remain unclear.
- Having to refer to GI tables makes eating unnecessarily complicated.
- The GI is not a measure of a food's healthfulness.
- Research suggests that by simply following the guidelines of [the Mediterranean](#) or other [heart-healthy diets](#), you'll not only lower your glycemic load but also improve the quality of your diet.

Choosing carbs that are packed with fiber (and don't spike your blood sugar)

### Instead of...

White rice

White potatoes (including fries and mashed potatoes)

Regular pasta

White bread

Sugary breakfast cereal

Instant oatmeal

Cornflakes

Corn

### Try these high-fiber options...

Brown or wild rice, riced cauliflower

Sweet potatoes, yams, cauliflower mash

Whole-wheat pasta, spaghetti squash

Whole-wheat or whole-grain bread

High-fiber, low-sugar cereal

Steel-cut or rolled oats

Low-sugar bran flakes

Peas or leafy greens

## Be smart about sweets

Eating a diabetic diet doesn't mean eliminating sugar altogether, but like most of us, chances are you [consume more sugar than is healthy](#). If you have diabetes, you can still enjoy a small serving of your favorite dessert now and then. The key is moderation.

**Reduce your cravings for sweets** by slowly reduce the sugar in your diet a little at a time to give your taste buds time to adjust.

**Hold the bread (or rice or pasta) if you want dessert.** Eating sweets at a meal adds extra carbohydrates so cut back on the other carb-heavy foods at the same meal.

**Add some healthy fat to your dessert.** Fat slows down the digestive process, meaning blood sugar levels don't spike as quickly. That doesn't mean you should reach for the donuts, though. Think healthy fats, such as peanut butter, ricotta cheese, yogurt, or nuts.

**Eat sweets with a meal, rather than as a stand-alone snack.** When eaten on their own, sweets cause your blood sugar to spike. But if you eat them along with other healthy foods as part of your meal, your blood sugar won't rise as rapidly.

**When you eat dessert, truly savor each bite.** How many times have you mindlessly eaten your way through a bag of cookies or a huge piece of cake? Can you really say that you enjoyed each bite? Make your indulgence count by [eating slowly and paying attention](#) to the flavors and textures. You'll enjoy it more, plus you're less likely to overeat.

## Tricks for cutting down on sugar

**Reduce soft drinks, soda, and juice.** For each 12 oz. serving of a sugar-sweetened beverage you drink a day, your risk for diabetes increases by about 15%. Try sparkling water with a twist of lemon or lime instead. Cut down on creamers and sweeteners you add to tea and coffee.

**Don't replace saturated fat with sugar.** Many of us replace saturated fat such as whole milk dairy with refined carbs, thinking we're making a healthier choice. Low-fat doesn't mean healthy when the fat has been replaced by added sugar.

**Sweeten foods yourself.** Buy unsweetened iced tea, plain yogurt, or unflavored oatmeal, for example, and add sweetener (or fruit) yourself. You'll likely add far less sugar than the manufacturer.

**Check labels** and opt for low sugar products and use fresh or frozen ingredients instead of canned goods. Be especially aware of the sugar content of cereals and sugary drinks.

**Avoid processed or packaged foods** like canned soups, frozen dinners, or low-fat meals that often contain hidden sugar. Prepare [more meals at home](#).

**Reduce the amount of sugar in recipes** by  $\frac{1}{4}$  to  $\frac{1}{3}$ . You can boost sweetness with mint, cinnamon, nutmeg, or vanilla extract instead of sugar.

**Find healthy ways to satisfy your sweet tooth.** Instead of ice cream, blend up frozen bananas for a creamy, frozen treat. Or enjoy a small chunk of dark chocolate, rather than a milk chocolate bar.

**Start with half of the dessert you normally eat,** and replace the other half with fruit.

## **Be careful about alcohol**

It's easy to underestimate the calories and carbs in alcoholic drinks, including beer and wine. And cocktails mixed with soda and juice can be loaded with sugar. Choose calorie-free mixers, drink only with food, and monitor your blood glucose as alcohol can interfere with diabetes medication and insulin.

## **Spot hidden sugar**

Being smart about sweets is only part of the battle. Sugar is also hidden in many packaged foods, fast food meals, and grocery store staples such as bread, cereals, canned goods, pasta sauce, margarine, instant mashed potatoes, frozen dinners, low-fat meals, and ketchup. The first step is to spot hidden sugar on food labels, which can take some sleuthing:

- Manufacturers provide the total amount of sugar on their labels but do not have to differentiate between added sugar and sugar that is naturally in the food.
- Added sugars are listed in the ingredients but aren't always easily recognizable as such. While sugar, honey, or molasses are easy enough to spot, added sugar could also be listed as corn sweetener, high-fructose corn syrup, evaporated cane juice, agave nectar, cane crystals, invert sugar, or any kind of fructose, dextrose, lactose, maltose, or syrup.
- While you'd expect sugary foods to have sugar listed near the top of their list of ingredients, manufacturers often use different types of added sugars which then appear scattered down the list. But all these little doses of different sweeteners can add up to a lot of extra sugar and empty calories!

## Choose fats wisely

Some fats are unhealthy and others have enormous health benefits, so it's important to [choose fats](#) wisely.

**Unhealthy (saturated) fats.** Found mainly in tropical oils, red meat, and dairy, there's no need to completely eliminate saturated fat from your diet—but rather, enjoy in moderation. The American Diabetes Association recommends consuming no more than 10% of your daily calories from saturated fat.

**Healthy (unsaturated) fats.** The healthiest fats are unsaturated fats, which come from fish and plant sources such as olive oil, nuts, and avocados. Omega-3 fatty acids fight inflammation and support brain and heart health. Good sources include salmon, tuna, and flaxseeds.

### Ways to reduce unhealthy fats and add healthy fats:

1. Instead of chips or crackers, snack on nuts or seeds or add them to your morning cereal. Nut butters are also very satisfying.
2. Instead of frying, choose to broil, bake, or stir-fry.
3. Avoid saturated fat from processed meats, packaged meals, and takeout food.
4. Instead of just red meat, vary your diet with skinless chicken, eggs, fish, and vegetarian sources of protein.
5. Use extra-virgin olive oil to dress salads, cooked vegetables, or pasta dishes.
6. Commercial salad dressings are often high in calories so create your own with olive oil, flaxseed oil, or sesame oil.
7. Add avocados to sandwiches and salads or make guacamole. Along with being loaded with healthy fats, they make for a filling and satisfying meal.
8. Enjoy dairy in moderation.

## Eat regularly and keep a food diary

It's encouraging to know that you only have to lose 7% of your body weight to cut your risk of diabetes in half. And you don't have to obsessively count calories or starve yourself to do it. Two of the most helpful strategies involve following a regular eating schedule and recording what you eat.

## **Eat at regularly set times**

Your body is better able to regulate blood sugar levels—and your weight—when you maintain a regular meal schedule. Aim for moderate and consistent portion sizes for each meal.

**Start your day off with a good breakfast.** It will provide energy as well as steady blood sugar levels.

**Eat regular small meals—up to 6 per day.** Eating regularly will help you keep your portions in check.

**Keep calorie intake the same.** To regulate blood sugar levels, try to eat roughly the same amount every day, rather than overeating one day or at one meal, and then skimping the next.

## **Keep a food diary**

A recent study found that people who kept a food diary lost twice as much weight as those who didn't. Why? A written record helps you identify problem areas—such as your afternoon snack or your morning latte—where you're getting more calories than you realized. It also increases your awareness of what, why, and how much you're eating, which helps you cut back on mindless snacking. Keep a notebook handy or use an app to track your eating.

## **Get more active**

[Exercise](#) can help you manage your weight and may improve your insulin sensitivity. An easy way to start exercising is to walk for 30 minutes a day (or for three 10-minute sessions if that's easier). You can also try swimming, biking, or any other moderate-intensity activity that has you working up a light sweat and breathing harder.

## **Next step...**

**Learn [how to lose weight and keep it off](#).** If your last diet attempt wasn't a success, or life events have caused you to gain weight, don't be discouraged. The key is to find a plan that works with your body's individual needs so that you can avoid common diet pitfalls and find long-term, weight loss success.



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## Get more help

[Healthy Eating for Type 2 Diabetes](#) (Harvard Medical School Special Health Report)

[Simple Steps to Preventing Diabetes](#) - How you can control and prevent diabetes through exercise and healthy eating. (Harvard School of Public Health)

[Diabetes Myths](#) -the truth about common diabetes diet myths. (American Diabetes Association)

[Diabetes nutrition: Including sweets in your meal plan](#) - What you should know about sugar, how to include it in your diet and information on alternatives. (Mayo Clinic)

[Diabetes Diet, Eating, & Physical Activity](#) - Tips for exercising with diabetes. (National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases)