

Tackling Diabetes:

Firstline Diet Advice

What is Diabetes?

Diabetes is a lifelong medical condition treated by diet and lifestyle changes, and possibly some medication (tablets and insulin). It is often diagnosed when the amount of glucose (sugar) in the blood gets too high and causes symptoms like increased thirst, frequent urination, and tiredness. The level of glucose is normally well controlled by an organ called the pancreas, but with diabetes, there are often two reasons why we struggle to keep the blood glucose within normal limits. Firstly, the pancreas does not produce enough insulin, and secondly, the body becomes less sensitive to what is produced, especially if you are overweight.

Why can diet and lifestyle help?

Following a healthy diet and lifestyle is a very important part of your diabetes treatment. What you choose to eat is likely to affect your diabetes control, blood pressure and cholesterol levels. Eating a healthy diet will help to control your blood glucose level, reduce your risk of heart disease and keep your weight at the desired level.

You can help your diabetes by following a healthy lifestyle

- Enjoy meals containing similar amounts of starchy food.
- Limit foods high in sugar, fat and salt.
- Make high fibre choices like wholegrain cereals and bread, vegetables and some fruit.
- Choose oily fish 1-2 times each week, Eg: mackerel, salmon, and sardines.
- If drinking alcohol – try to keep within recommended limits.
- Maintain a healthy body weight, if you are overweight, lose weight sensibly -your doctor or nurse should be able to help you do this.
- Participate in regular exercise and be physically active every day.
- If you smoke – talk to your GP about ways to QUIT.
- Keep an interest in good health. Have your diabetes check-up every 6-12 months, and contact your GP or Practice Nurse if your blood glucose levels remain high.

What do I look for on labels?

- Diet or Low calorie
- Reduced or No Added sugar
- Reduced or Low fat
- High fibre / Fibre-added / Fibre-enriched
- Reduced / No added salt

Healthy Cooking Styles

Deep frying or frying in oil adds unnecessary calories to your waistline. Try grilling, dry frying in a non-stick pan, stewing without added oil, stir-fry, rack-baking, poaching in milk, water or wine. Fresh herbs and spices are good ways to increase flavour without adding calories – particularly garlic, black pepper, ginger and chilli.

What can I eat and drink?

- Have 3 regular meals containing some starchy carbohydrate (like cereal, bread, chapati, roti, rice, noodles or string hoppes, couscous, pasta, potato, polenta, beans, lentils, green banana/plantain, yam). Wholemeal or wholegrain choices are best.
- Always fill your plate with lots of salad or vegetables – use low fat/low salt dressing for flavour if necessary.
- Include at least 2-3 portions of fruit spread over the day (like 1 apple, or banana, 2 kiwi fruit etc). All fruits are a good choices if you limit to one portion at a time. The only exception is fruit tinned in syrup as this adds unnecessary sucrose (sugar). Fruit juice contains natural sugar and no fibre, so limit to one small cup per day and include with a meal.
- Choose lean or trim cuts of meat, remove skin on chicken & turkey before cooking and select oily fish like mackerel, sardines, herring, and salmon regularly.
- Include 2-3 low fat dairy foods each day – 1 cup semi-skimmed/skimmed milk, 1 pot of diet or natural low fat yogurt, 1oz reduced fat cheese are good suggestions.
- Use low fat/reduced fat spread in preference to butter. Mono or polyunsaturated blends (like olive or sunflower) are good choices but remember to still only use small amounts.
- Drink plenty of water, low sugar squash, diet fizzy drink during the day. Aim for 1-2 cups at each meal. Tea and coffee are also suitable.

What should I limit?

- Added sugar & sugary food/drinks like ordinary jam, honey, sugar-coated breakfast cereal, chocolate, sweet biscuits & cakes, ordinary squash and fizzy drinks, Nutriment, Supermalt, and instant drinks. All add many extra calories and may raise your blood glucose level too quickly – making it difficult for your body to control your levels.
- Too much fatty & fried food, like ordinary mince, sausages and burgers, cream, crisps, Indian mix, ghee, coconut and palm oil, chips and takeaway food (such as fried chicken, fish & chips) may increase your cholesterol levels and weight. Nuts are 50% fat but contain a healthy type – if you are overweight, limit your intake and choose unsalted.
- Alcohol should be limited to 3-4 units per day for men and 2-3 units per day for women. 1 unit equals: ½ pint of beer, 1 pub-measure of spirits, or 125mL glass of wine. The higher the alcohol content, the smaller the unit size. Alcohol is high in calories and may affect your blood glucose control. Try not to drink alcohol on an empty stomach and check with your pharmacist whether alcohol is suitable with your medication.
- If you are overweight or have high blood pressure, avoid adding extra fat as butter, margarine or oil, or salt to your cooking or eating lots of salty foods. High salt foods include sea salt, seasoning, packet sauces or soups, soy & Worcestershire sauce, Maggi, Bovril, Oxo, powdered gravy or and vegetable salts like garlic or onion powders.

There are many myths about diet and diabetes. Most people are surprised what they can include on a healthy diet. This sheet was designed to provide some basic information on Diet and Newly Diagnosed Diabetes. Diabetes UK recommends you receive dietary advice from a State Registered Dietitian. Dietitians work in hospitals, in some community health centres and GP practices - ask your health team for a referral.