

Tackling Diabetes:

Firstline South Asian 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. In diabetes, there are two main reasons why the body struggles to keep the blood glucose within normal limits. Firstly, the pancreas does not produce enough insulin. 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. Because diabetes runs in families, these changes can help them to live a healthy life too.

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 & bread, lentils, vegetables and some fruit.
- Choose oily fish 1-2 times each week, e.g. mackerel, salmon, and sardines.
- If drinking alcohol – try to keep within recommended limits.
- Maintain a healthy body weight. If 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. Get your diabetes check-up every 6-12 months, and contact your GP or Practice Nurse if your 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

Try grilling, dry frying in a non-stick pan, making a curry or stew without added oil and skim fat off the top when cool, try rack-baking, stir-frying, or 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. Deep frying, frying in oil, or using creamed coconut, coconut milk, ghee or coconut oil in your food adds unnecessary calories to your waistline. Try to avoid doing this.

What can I eat and drink?

- Have 3 regular meals containing some starchy carbohydrate: breads (like chapati, roti, potato, pitta bread, or crackers); cereals (like semolina & cracked wheat); pulses (like lentils, peas, beans & dal); pasta, rice & rice foods (such as noodles or string hoppers). 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. All vegetables are good for you including broccoli, spinach, okra/lady fingers, brinjal/aubergine, pumpkin & cauliflower.
- Include at least 2-3 portions of fruit, spread over the day (such as 1 apple or pear, 1 slice mango, or 8-10 grapes). All fruit are good choices if you limit to one portion at a time. The only exception is fruit tinned in syrup due to sucrose (sugar). Fruit juice contains natural sugar & no fibre, so limit to one small cup per day & include with a meal as one of your portions.
- Choose lean or trim cuts of meat. Remove skin on chicken & turkey before cooking & select oily fish like mackerel, sardines, herring, & salmon regularly.
- Include 2-3 low fat dairy foods each day. One portion equals – 1 cup semi-skimmed/skimmed milk, 1 pot of diet or natural low fat yoghurt or 1oz reduced fat cheese.
- Drink plenty of water, low sugar squash, or diet fizzy drink during the day. Aim for 6-8 cups each day. Tea & coffee is also suitable.
- Use low fat/reduced fat spread in preference to butter. Mono- or polyunsaturated blends (like olive or sunflower) are good choices but remember to use small amounts.

What should I limit?

- Added sugar & sugary foods like honey, molasses, brown sugar, cube sugar, jam, sugar-coated breakfast cereals, chocolate, sweet biscuits & cakes, ordinary squash & fizzy drinks (like Rubicon, Ginger beer, Lucozade), Nutriment, Sweet Lassi & Instant drinks like Milo. Also limit sweetmeats & cakes. All add many extra calories & may raise your blood glucose level too quickly.
- Too much fatty & fried food can easily increase your cholesterol levels & weight. Cut down on fat, oil, ghee, coconut milk or creamed coconut in cooking, full fat cheese/paneer & full-cream milk. Fried food like puri, samosas, pakora, bhajia, chips, Indian mix, fast foods like chicken & burgers contain too much fat. Try more steamed dishes and used reduced fat cheese or skim semi-skimmed milk. Although nuts contain a healthy type they are still high fat – so if overweight, limit your intake & choose unsalted.
- A diet high in salt is thought to contribute to high blood pressure & increase your risk of having a stroke. Try to use less salt in cooking & at the table (onion or garlic powder, packet sauces, soups or gravy). Cut down on high salt snacks and convenience food like chevda, ganthiya, sev, crisps; instead try dry-roasted chickpeas, plain nuts & popcorn. Continue using spices like green & dry massala powder to make food tasty.
- Alcohol should be limited to 3-4 units per day for men & 2-3 units per day for women. 1 unit equals ½ pint of beer, 1 pub-measure of spirits, or 125mL glass of wine. Alcohol is high in calories & may affect your blood glucose control and weight. Do not drink alcohol on an empty stomach & check with your pharmacist whether alcohol is suitable with your medication.

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