

Eating Well with Diabetes and Carbohydrate Basics



First there are three things to keep in mind to help control your blood sugars:

1. When you eat
2. What you eat
3. How much you eat

Here are some tips to get you started.

1 WHEN to eat

Eating at regular times will help control your blood sugars. This also helps to prevent low blood sugars (or hypoglycemia).

- Eat at least 3 meals each day including breakfast. This helps you feel satisfied. It also reduces your chances of over-eating later.
- Try to eat at the same times each day.
- Try to eat a meal or a snack every 4 to 5 hours during your day. If you take insulin at dinner or bedtime, you may need a small bedtime snack.
- To prevent low blood sugars, don't skip or delay your meals and snacks.

2 WHAT to eat

You do not need special foods because you have diabetes. In fact, the foods that are good for you are good for everyone in your family. It is a good idea however, to try to choose more whole grain foods full of fiber. Fiber helps to keep your blood sugars in control. Each day try to eat a variety of healthy foods like:

- Grains, whole grain breads and cereals, pasta and rice, beans and peas, starchy vegetables (like corn, potatoes or yams)
- Fruit
- Vegetables
- Low-fat or nonfat milk and nonfat artificially sweetened yogurt
- Fish, poultry (without skin), lean, trimmed meats, tofu, low-fat or nonfat cheeses, peanut butter

Choose heart healthy fats more often. These include olive or canola oils and some kinds of nuts such as almonds or walnuts. Limit sweets or baked goods and other foods with saturated and trans fats.

3 HOW MUCH to eat

Your body changes most of the food you eat into blood sugar (or glucose), to supply your body with energy. When you have diabetes, your body has a hard time turning this sugar into energy. More of the sugar stays in your blood. If you eat too much food, especially too many carbohydrates (or carbs), your

blood sugars may get too high. But if you eat smaller amounts and spread your meals throughout the day, you will better control your blood sugar and feel healthier.

What foods contain carbohydrates?

- Starches (grains, beans, starchy vegetables)
- Fruit and fruit juice
- Milk and yogurt

A single serving from any of these food groups equals 1 carb serving and contains 15 grams of carbohydrates.

- Sweets, and desserts, chips, crackers, and fried foods usually contain a lot of carbs and fats and often do not provide much added nutrition. Plan to eat small servings of these foods as a special treat every once in a while.

For more help with carbs, check the Diabetes Food Pyramid or the Diabetes Exchange Lists, or other diabetes nutrition reference books you can find at our Health Education Centers.

Why are carbohydrates important to my diabetes?

Your body turns most of the carbohydrates (carbs) you eat into sugar (glucose). As we said earlier, when you have diabetes, the cells in your body have problems storing this sugar to use for energy. So watching your carbs is important.

- If you eat too many carbs overall, or too much at once, your blood sugars can rise too high.

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- If you eat too few carbs, your blood sugar can go too low, and your body may not get the energy it needs. You might feel dizzy or faint.

How many carbohydrates should I eat?

The amount of carbohydrates you need depends on your diabetes goals, calorie and nutrition needs and activity level. For most people with diabetes, it may help to eat between 3 to 4 carb servings (45 to 60 grams carbohydrate) at each meal and 1 carb serving (15 grams carbohydrate) for snacks. Work with your dietitian or diabetes educator to find the right amount of carbs you'll need at each meal or snack to feel your best.

How do I read a food label?

Reading food labels is important. It can show you how different foods fit into your meal plan. The label tells you what the size of one serving is and the amount of grams of “Total Carbohydrate” that serving has. You do not need to look at the sugar grams, since these are already counted in the Total Carbohydrate grams. Carefully read the label on food packages with claims such as “No Sugar Added” or “Reduced Sugar,” even foods that claim to be “Sugar Free.” Many of these foods still contain carbohydrates. Remember: 1 carb serving = 15 grams of carbohydrates.

Where can I start?

A good place to start is to limit less healthy carbohydrates like candy, sodas or desserts. It helps to:

- Choose diet sodas, calorie-free drinks, or water instead of sugar-sweetened drinks.
- Consider using sugar substitutes or artificial sweeteners in place of regular sugar.
- If you want a sweet, plan ahead to include it with your meal. At the same time, try to add a little extra time for exercise to help keep those high sugars down. Aim for a small dessert (1 carb serving) such as 1/2 cup of ice cream or 3 graham crackers or 2 small cookies.



Nutrition Facts	
Serving size 1 cup (236ml)	
Servings per container 1	
Amount Per Serving	
Calories 120 Calories from Fat 45	
	% Daily Value*
Total Fat 3g	8%
Saturated Fat 3g	
Trans Fat 0g	
Cholesterol 20 mg	7%
Sodium 120 mg	5%
Total Carbohydrate 11g	4%
Dietary Fiber 0g	12%
Sugars 11g	
Protein 3g	
Vitamin A 80%	Vitamin C 60%
Calcium 4%	Iron 4%

*Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet. Your Daily Values may be higher or lower depending on your calorie needs.

Additional resources

- To learn more about nutrition and diabetes, visit: kp.org/healthyliving or call your Health Education Center for diabetes programs, classes and videos available at your local Kaiser Permanente facility.
- Visit your physician's Home Page at kp.org/mydoctor.
- Visit kp.org/diabetes.

This information is not intended to diagnose or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor.