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Foods and drinks to avoid with diabetes

A diabetes diet plan can include most foods, but people may need smaller portions. That said, certain foods from each food group may be better than others.

Diabetes interferes with the ability to process blood sugar, also known as blood glucose. Currently, nearly 11% of people in the United States have type 1 or type 2 diabetes. And 35% of adults in the country have prediabetes, according to the 2020–2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

Having a healthy, balanced diet can help many people manage diabetes symptoms and reduce the risk of complications. A person may wonder what foods to avoid with diabetes. Different foods provide each of the main macronutrients that give us energy: carbohydrates, fats, and proteins. There are more and less healthy types of each of these foods.

Below, we explore which foods a person who has, or has a risk of, diabetes may want to limit or avoid. We also offer some suggestions for crafting a healthy diabetes diet plan.

Carbohydrates

Carbohydrates are an important source of energy. This macronutrient also has the most influence on a person's blood sugar, or blood glucose.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommend that people with diabetes get about half of their daily calories from carbohydrates. Having the same amount of carbohydrates in each meal can help keep blood sugar levels stable.

What is most important, however, is eating the right kind of carbohydrates.

Carbs to avoid

There are three main types of carbohydrates in food: starch, sugar, and fiber. Starches and sugars pose the biggest problems for people with diabetes because the body breaks these down into glucose.

Refined carbs

Refined carbs, or refined starches, are broken down through processing before they reach our plates. As a result of this processing, the body quickly absorbs the carbs and converts them into glucose. This increases blood sugar, and it means that a person may feel hungry again soon after a meal.

For people with diabetes or a risk of the condition, some examples of carb sources to limit include white rice and anything made with white flour only, such as:

white bread
white pasta
some cereals
some crackers
many baked goods

white bread

white pasta

some cereals

some crackers

many baked goods

Monitoring the total carbohydrate intake per meal can help a person keep their glucose levels in the target range.

Learn how to count carbohydrates for diabetes.

Sugars

Sugary foods mostly contain sugar and low-quality carbohydrates. They often have little or no nutritional value and can cause sharp spikes in blood glucose. Sugar can also contribute to weight gain and the risk of heart disease and stroke.

Foods that are often high in sugar include baked goods, such as doughnuts, croissants, cakes, and cookies, as well as pizza dough. Some other sources of sugar include:

many sauces and condiments
agave nectar and other sweeteners
maple syrup and other syrups
candy bars

many sauces and condiments

agave nectar and other sweeteners

maple syrup and other syrups

candy bars

premade fruit-flavored yogurts

Many premade items in grocery stores contain added sugar, and this may not be obvious on their ingredients labels. Nutrition labels may refer to added sugar as fruit juice concentrate, molasses, honey, syrup, fructose, or dextrose, for example.

For this reason, it is a good idea to avoid packaged or processed foods with unfamiliar ingredients and to select items that are as whole and unprocessed as possible.

People with diabetes should take care when consuming dried fruit and premade juices or fruit salad, as these often contain added sugar.

Artificial sweeteners are low in calories, but research shows that they still have a negative effect on blood sugar by increasing insulin resistance. More studies are needed to determine the extent of this effect.

Carbs to eat

People with diabetes should focus on eating fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, which contain essential vitamins, minerals, and fiber.

Whole grains and fiber

The body does not absorb all the carbs from whole grains. And those that it does absorb enter the bloodstream more slowly than processed carbs. For this reason, carbs from whole grains are less likely to cause blood sugar levels to spike. They lead to the person feeling fuller for longer.

Whole grains contain fiber. Although fiber is technically a carbohydrate, it does not break down into glucose in the body and does not add calories. Fiber is a healthy carb.

The 2020–2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend planning healthy meals by visualizing what takes up space on the plate. Whole grains, for example, should take up half of the plate. They also recommend that, from 2 years of age, people get at least 14 grams (g) of fiber per every 1,000 calories. People over the age of 51 need at least 28 g of fiber per 1,000 calories.

Examples of whole grains include:

brown or wild rice
barley
quinoa
oatmeal

amaranth

millet

A 2012 study looked at the development of prediabetes and type 2 diabetes in people who consumed more than 59.1 g of whole grains a day. It found that these participants had a 34% lower risk of their glucose tolerance worsening, compared with participants who ate less than 30.6 g of whole grains a day.

Fruits and vegetables

Fruits contain high-quality carbohydrates and fiber, as do nuts and legumes, such as beans, peas, and lentils. These foods may help slow the absorption of glucose.

The 2020–2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend that fruit and vegetables take up at least half of the plate for each meal. Though fruits may cause blood sugar levels to rise, this increase is less severe than it would be after eating a sugary snack.

A person may opt for:

fresh, whole fruit raw, steamed, roasted, or grilled non-starchy vegetables frozen or canned vegetables, as long as they are unsalted or have low sodium
canned or frozen fruit with no added sugar, including syrup unsweetened applesauce

fresh, whole fruit

raw, steamed, roasted, or grilled non-starchy vegetables

frozen or canned vegetables, as long as they are unsalted or have low sodium

canned or frozen fruit with no added sugar, including syrup

unsweetened applesauce

Protein

Protein helps the body build, maintain, and replace its tissue. Our organs, muscles, and immune systems consist of proteins. The body can break down protein into sugar, but this process is less efficient than breaking down carbs.

Proteins to avoid

For people with diabetes, choosing the best sources of protein largely depends on how much fat and carbohydrates these foods contain. When protein-rich foods are also high in fat, they can lead to weight gain and high cholesterol.

Processed or fatty meats

Eating even small amounts of red meat, such as beef, pork, or lamb, may increase the risk of

diabetes. A 2020 study showed that eating just 50 g red meat or fish each day can raise diabetes risk by 11%.

Also, people with diabetes should consider avoiding or limiting the intake of:

- breaded, fried, and high-sodium meats
- processed meats, such as bacon, hot dogs, and deli meats
- ribs and other fatty cuts of meat
- poultry with the skin on
- deep-fried fish

Processed meats tend to be high in sodium, or salt. People with high blood pressure should also be especially cautious and limit their sodium intake to no more than 2,300 milligrams per day.

Proteins to eat

For an omnivore, the aim is to opt for healthier animal proteins, as well as dairy and plant alternatives.

Healthier animal proteins

A person should choose the leanest options available. These may be:

- skinless chicken or turkey
- trimmed cuts of beef without the fat
- roasts or chops, if red meat is still part of the diet
- fish, especially those rich in omega-3 fatty acids, such as Albacore tuna, herring, or salmon
- whole eggs

skinless chicken or turkey

trimmed cuts of beef without the fat

roasts or chops, if red meat is still part of the diet

fish, especially those rich in omega-3 fatty acids, such as Albacore tuna, herring, or salmon

whole eggs

Plant proteins

When considering sources of plant-based protein, check how many fats and carbohydrates each option contains. A person might choose:

beans

lentils

lentils

nuts

soy products

tofu

Dairy

Dairy is a source of protein. It also provides calcium and important vitamins. But dairy products also contain a sugar called lactose. A person with diabetes can consume dairy, as long as they account for the carbs in their daily planning.

The 2020–2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend at least 3 cups of dairy a day. However, full-fat dairy can increase the levels of cholesterol in the blood and lead to a higher risk of heart disease, compared with low-fat options.

Both type 1 and type 2 diabetes also increase the risk of cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes often occurs alongside obesity. For this reason, it is best to opt for low-fat dairy foods without added sugar.

Options may include:

plain yogurt without added sugar
reduced-fat cheese or full-fat cheese in moderate servings
cottage cheese
milk

plain yogurt without added sugar

reduced-fat cheese or full-fat cheese in moderate servings

cottage cheese

milk

Non-dairy milk alternatives

Plant-based milks, such as soy, rice, coconut, almond, or oat milks, are healthy options, but a person should choose unsweetened plant-based milk.

It is important to note that the newest dietary guidelines only consider fortified soy milk to be equivalent to dairy, in terms of nutritional composition. This includes levels of protein.

But it is also worth keeping in mind that — except for oat and hazelnut milks — plant milks are lower in sugar than cow milk.

Fats

Fat is a source of essential fatty acids, such as omega-3s, and it is an integral part of a healthy, balanced diet. Fat also helps the body absorb vitamins A, D, E, and K.

There are four types: saturated, trans, monounsaturated, and polyunsaturated fats. A person

can learn how much of each type is in a given food on the food's nutrition label. It is important to focus on keeping the right types of fat in the diet, especially for people living with diabetes.

Fats to avoid

Unhealthy fats can increase cholesterol levels and contribute to insulin resistance. This may increase the risk of developing diabetes or contribute to blood sugar spikes in people who have the condition.

Saturated fat

This mainly exists in animal products, oils, and processed foods. A person should consume less than 10% of their daily calories from saturated fat. Some foods with high saturated fat contents include:

butter
lard
certain oils, such as palm oil
cream-based dressings and dips
full-fat mayonnaise
French fries
breaded and battered foods
potato chips
many premade meals
burgers
most fast foods
many salad dressings

Learn more about healthy and unhealthy fats [here](#).

Trans fat

Hydrogenation is a process that makes a liquid oil into a solid fat. What results is a trans fat, which is unhealthier than saturated fat.

It is a good idea to avoid any foods with hydrogenated or partially hydrogenated oils, as well as foods with liquid oils.

Food packaging may advertise 0 g of trans fats if the food has less than 0.5 g. It is worth checking the ingredients carefully.

Fats to eat

The American Diabetes Association recommends focusing on monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats. These can reduce levels of low-density lipoprotein cholesterol, or “bad” cholesterol. They can also reduce the risk of heart disease and stroke.

In addition, a diet high in these fats, such as the Mediterranean diet, may have a positive effect on how the body metabolizes glucose.

Monounsaturated fat

This exists in many healthy oils, nuts, and fruits, including:

peanuts, peanut butter, and peanut oil
other nuts and nut butters, such as cashews, almonds, and almond butter

olives and olive oil

canola oil

avocados

sunflower oil

Polyunsaturated fat

This also exists in some oils and nuts, as well as in other foods. Two types of polyunsaturated fat, omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids, are especially healthy. Food sources include:

fish, such as salmon, tuna, herring, or mackerel
nuts, such as walnuts

flaxseeds and flaxseed oil

chia seeds

tofu

eggs

Drinks, including alcohol

It is also important for people with diabetes or a risk of it to keep track of what they drink. Many

soft drinks and juices contain carbohydrates and added sugars.

A person with diabetes can safely consume unsweetened teas, coffees, and zero-calorie drinks, as well as plain water, of course. To give the water some flavor, try throwing in some whole fruit pieces.

Alcoholic drinks can also contain sugar and carbs. People should limit their consumption of alcoholic beverages, especially:

beerdrinks that contain fruitdessert winesdrinks with a sweet mixer

beer

drinks that contain fruit

dessert wines

drinks with a sweet mixer

Anyone who does drink alcohol should do so moderately. This means having no more than a 5-ounce (oz) glass of wine, a 12-oz glass of beer, or 1.5 oz of an 80-proof spirit.

Another reason that heavy drinking is harmful is that combining it with diabetes medications may lead to low blood sugar, or hypoglycemia. The symptoms of this are similar to intoxication and may be difficult to recognize.

Takeaway

The key to healthful eating is to choose appropriate, healthy foods from each food group. It is important to focus on the macronutrients recommended above and to avoid highly processed foods that are high in sugar, salt, and fat.

A diabetes educator or registered dietitian can help develop a healthy eating plan that works for each individual. They can recommend what to eat, how much to eat, and when to have meals and snacks. They base these recommendations on factors such as a person's weight, how active they are, and their treatment plan and blood glucose targets.

Read this article in Spanish.

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