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Nutrition

16 Best Foods for People with Diabetes

Managing blood sugar (blood glucose) is important for people living with diabetes. Some of the best foods for people with diabetes are high protein, low sugar options like avocados and fatty fish.

Figuring out the best foods to eat when you havediabetesdoesn’t have to be tough. To keep things simple, your main goal should be managing your blood sugar levels. It’s also important to eat foods that help prevent diabetes complications like heart disease.

Your diet can have a major role in preventing and managing diabetes. Here are the 16 best foods for people living with diabetes, both type 1 and type 2.

Best foods for people living with diabetes

1. Fatty fish

Salmon, sardines, herring, anchovies, and mackerel are great sources of theomega-3 fatty acidsDHA and EPA, which have majorbenefitsfor heart health.

Getting enough of these fats on a regular basis is especially important for people with diabetes, who have an increased risk of heart disease and stroke.

DHA and EPAprotect the cells that line your blood vessels, reduce markers ofinflammation, and

may help improve the way your arteries function.

A2021 research reviewindicates that people who eat fatty fish regularly have a lower risk of heart attack and overall cardiovascular disease.

Research also indicatesthat regular fish consumption can help manage blood pressure and body weight, which can help prevent diabetes and metabolic syndrome.

Fish is also a great source of high qualityprotein, which helps you feel full and helps stabilize blood sugar levels.

Fatty fish contain omega-3 fatty acids that can help reduce inflammation and other risk factors of heart disease and stroke. Plus, it’s a great source of protein, which is important for managing blood sugar.

2. Leafy greens

Leafy green vegetables are extremely nutritious and low incalories.

They’re also very low in digestiblecarbs, or carbs that the body absorbs, so they will not significantly affect blood sugar levels.

Spinach,kale, and other leafy greens are good sources of many vitamins and minerals, including vitamin C.

Another2021 review of researchsuggests people with diabetes can significantly benefit from vitamin C therapy.

Vitamin Cacts as a potent antioxidant and has anti-inflammatory qualities.

Increasing dietary intake of vitamin C-rich foods may help people with diabetes increase their serum vitamin C levels while reducing inflammation and cellular damage, according to asmall 2017 study.

Leafy green vegetables are rich in nutrients like vitamin C as well as antioxidants that protect your heart and eye health.

3. Avocados

Avocadoshaveless than1 gram of sugar, few carbohydrates, a high fiber content, and healthy fats, so you don’t have to worry about them raising your blood sugar levels.

Data provided via the 2019 Adventist Health Study-2 (AHS-2) suggests that avocado consumption is alsoassociated withsignificantly lower body weight and body mass index (BMI). The study involved participants consuming a specific amount of avocado and self-reporting their height and weight at scheduled intervals. Participants had to meet certain criteria to join the research cohort.

This makes avocados an ideal snack for people with diabetes, especially since obesity increases the chances of developing diabetes.

Avocados may have properties specific to preventing diabetes.

A2019 studyin mice indicated that avocatin B (AvoB), a fat molecule found only in avocados, inhibits incomplete oxidation in skeletal muscle and the pancreas, which reduces insulin resistance.

More research is needed in humans to establish the connection between avocados and diabetes prevention.

Avocados have less than 1 gram of sugar and are associated with improved overall diet quality. Avocados may also have properties specific to diabetes prevention.

4. Eggs

Regular egg consumption may reduce your heart disease risk in several ways.

Eggs may decrease inflammation, improve insulin sensitivity, increase your HDL (good) cholesterol levels, and modify the size and shape of your LDL (bad) cholesterol.

A2020 studyshowed that eating 12 eggs a week over 4 weeks for breakfast helped lower blood pressure in adults with prediabetes.

A2017 research reviewindicated that eating 6–12 eggs per week as part of a nutritious diet and health-promoting lifestyle did not increase heart disease risk factors in people with diabetes. Experts noted that research limitations prevented being able to provide definitive conclusions.

Eggs may improve risk factors for heart disease, promote blood sugar management, protect eye health, and keep you feeling full.

5. Chia seeds

Chia seedsmay be a healthful food for people with diabetes.

They’re extremely high in fiber, yet low in digestible carbs.

In fact, 11 of the 12 grams (g) of carbs in a 28-g (1-ounce) serving of chia seedsarefiber, which does not raise blood sugar.

Theviscous fiberin chia seeds can actuallyloweryour blood sugar levels by slowing down the rate at which food moves through your gut and is absorbed.

Adifferent 2017 studyinvolving 77 adults with overweight or obesity and a diagnosis of type 2 diabetes showed that eating chia seeds supported weight loss and helped maintain good glycemic control.

Additionally, chia seeds have been shown to help reduce blood pressure and inflammatory markers.

Chia seeds contain high amounts of fiber, which may help you lose weight. They also help maintain blood glucose levels.

6. Beans

Beansare a type of legume rich in B vitamins, beneficial minerals (calcium, potassium, and magnesium), and fiber.

They also have a very lowglycemic index (GI), which is important for managing diabetes.

In anolder studyinvolving more than 3,000 participants at high risk of cardiovascular disease, those who had a higher consumption of legumes had a reduced chance of developing type 2 diabetes.

Beans are cheap, nutritious, and have a low glycemic index (GI), making them a healthy option for people with diabetes.

7. Greek yogurt

An olderlong-term studyinvolving health data from more than 100,000 participants found that a daily serving of yogurt was linked to an 18 percent lower risk of developing type 2 diabetes.

Researchshows yogurt and other dairy foods may lead toweight lossand improved body composition in people with type 2 diabetes.

The high levels of calcium, protein, and a special type of fat calledconjugated linoleic acid (CLA)found in yogurt may help keep you feeling full for longer.

What’s more, Greek yogurt contains only 6–8 g of carbs per serving, which is lower than regular yogurt.

It’s also higher in protein, which maypromote weight lossby reducing appetite and thus decreasing calorie intake.

Yogurt, especially Greek yogurt, may promote healthy blood sugar levels, reduce risk factors for heart disease, and help with weight management.

8. Nuts

Researchon a variety of different nuts has shown that regular consumption may reduce inflammation and help prevent weight gain.

Nuts may also help people with diabetes improve their heart health.

Research from 2019involving more than 16,000 participants with type 2 diabetes found that

eating tree nuts — such as walnuts, almonds, hazelnuts, and pistachios — lowered their risk of heart disease and death.

Research also indicates that nuts can improve blood glucose levels.

An olderresearch reviewinvolving people with type 2 diabetes found that eating walnuts daily improved blood glucose levels.

This finding is important because people with type 2 diabetes often have elevated insulin levels, which are linked to obesity.

Nuts are a healthy addition to a balanced diet. They're high in fiber and can help with heart health, blood glucose levels, and weight management.

9. Broccoli

Broccoliis a highly nutritious vegetable.

A half cup of cooked broccolicontainsonly 27 calories and 3 grams of digestible carbs, along with important nutrients like vitamin C and magnesium.

One2024 studyin mice found that consuming broccoli led to a reduction in blood glucose.

This reduction in blood glucose levels is likely due tosulforaphane. The body converts glucosinolates, which are found in broccoli, to sulforaphane and then uses it in metabolic processes.

Broccoli is a low calorie, low carb food with high nutrient value. It's loaded with healthy plant compounds that may help protect against various diseases.

10. Extra-virgin olive oil

Extra-virgin olive oil contains oleic acid, a type of monounsaturated fat thatmay improveglycemic management reduce fasting and post-meal triglyceride levels. It also has antioxidant properties.

This is important because people with diabetes tend to have trouble managing blood sugar levels and have high triglyceride levels.

Oleic acid may also stimulate the fullness hormone GLP-1.

In areview of 32 studieslooking at differenttypes of fat, olive oil was the only one shown to reduce heart disease risk.

Olive oil also contains antioxidants called polyphenols.

Polyphenols reduce inflammation, protect the cells lining your blood vessels, keep oxidation from damaging your LDL (bad) cholesterol, and decrease blood pressure.

Extra-virgin olive oil is unrefined, so it retains antioxidants and other properties that make it so healthy.

Be sure to choose extra-virgin olive oil from a reputable source, since many olive oils are mixed with cheaper oils likecornandsoy.

Extra-virgin olive oil contains healthy oleic acid. It has benefits for blood pressure and heart health.

11. Flaxseeds

Also known as common flax or linseeds, flaxseeds have a high content of heart-healthy omega-3 fats, fiber, and other unique plant compounds.

A portion of their insoluble fiber is made up of lignans, which may help decrease heart disease risk and improve blood sugar management.

Areviewlooking at 25 randomized clinical trials found a significant association between whole flaxseed supplementation and a reduction in blood glucose.

Flaxseeds may also help lower blood pressure.

A2016 studyinvolving participants with prediabetes showed that a daily intake of flaxseed powder lowered blood pressure — but it did not improve glycemic management or insulin resistance.

Flaxseeds may help reduce inflammation, lower heart disease risk, decrease blood sugar levels, and improve insulin sensitivity.

12. Apple cider vinegar and vinegar

Apple cider vinegarand plain vinegar have many health benefits.

According to findings from aresearch reviewinvolving six studies with 317 people with type 2 diabetes, vinegar showed beneficial effects on fasting blood sugar levels andhemoglobin A1C (HbA1c)results.

Apple cidervinegar may have many other healthful properties, including helping improve blood sugar spikes and insulin sensitivity. However, more studies are needed to confirm its health benefits.

To incorporate apple cider vinegar into your eating plan, begin with 4 teaspoons (tsp) mixed in a glass ofwatereach day before each meal. Note that you may want to put 1 tsp per glass of water so that the taste is not as strong. Increase to a maximum of 4 tablespoons per day.

Apple cider vinegar may help improve fasting blood sugar levels, but more research is needed to confirm its health benefits.

13. Strawberries

Strawberries are high in antioxidants known as anthocyanins, which give them their red color.

They also contain polyphenols, which are beneficial plant compounds with antioxidant properties.

A2017 studyshowed that a 6-week consumption ofpolyphenolsfrom strawberries and cranberries improved insulin sensitivity in adults with overweight and obesity who did not have diabetes.

This is important because low insulin sensitivity can cause blood sugar levels to become too high.

Strawberries are low sugar fruits that have strong anti-inflammatory properties and may help improve insulin resistance.

14. Garlic

For its tiny size and low calorie count,garlicis incredibly nutritious.

One clove (3 grams) of raw garlic, which is roughly 4 calories,contains:

Manganese:2% of the daily value (DV)Vitamin B6:2% of the DVVitamin C:1% of the DVSelenium:1% of the DVFiber:0.06 grams

Manganese:2% of the daily value (DV)

Vitamin B6:2% of the DV

Vitamin C:1% of the DV

Selenium:1% of the DV

Fiber:0.06 grams

An olderreview of researchindicates that garlic contributes to improved blood glucose management and can help regulate cholesterol.

Garlic is highly nutritious and can help improve cholesterol and blood pressure in people with diabetes.

15. Squash

Squash, which has many varieties, is one of the healthiest vegetables around. The dense, filling food is fairly low in calories and has a low GI.

Like most vegetables, squash contains beneficial antioxidants. Squash also has less sugar than sweet potatoes, making it a great alternative.

Researchpublished in 2018 shows that pumpkin polysaccharides, which are also found in

squash, improved insulin tolerance and decreased levels of serum glucose in rats.

Although there's very little research involving humans and squash benefits, asmall 2018 studyshowed that squash decreased high blood glucose levels quickly and effectively in people with diabetes who were critically ill.

Summer and winter squash contain beneficial antioxidants and may help lower blood sugar.

16. Shirataki noodles

Shirataki noodlesare wonderful for diabetes and weight management.

These noodles are high in the fiberglucomannan, which is extracted from konjac root.

This plant is grown in Japan and processed into the shape of noodles or rice known as shirataki.

Glucomannan is a type of viscous fiber, which helps you feel full and satisfied.

What's more, research hasshownthat it can reduce blood sugar levels after eating and improve heart disease risk factors in people with diabetes andmetabolic syndrome.

In one fairly recentstudy, glucomannan significantly reduced levels of fasting blood glucose, serum insulin, and cholesterol in rats with diabetes.

However, these noodles are typically packaged with a liquid that has a fishy odor. You need to rinse them very well before use.

Then, to ensure a noodle-like texture, cook the noodles for several minutes in a skillet over high heat without added fat.

The glucomannan in shirataki noodles promotes feelings of fullness and can improve blood sugar management and cholesterol levels.

Discover more about Type 2 Diabetes

Foods to limit or avoid

Just as important as figuring out which foods to include in a diabetes-friendly eating plan is understanding which foods you may need to limit.

Many foods and drinks are high in carbs and added sugar, which can cause blood sugar levels to spike. Other foods could negatively affect heart health or contribute to weight gain.

Here are a few foods to consider limiting or avoiding if you have diabetes.

1. Refined grains

Refined grainslike white bread, pasta, and rice are high in carbs but low in fiber, which can increase blood sugar levels more quickly than their whole grain counterparts.

Oneresearch reviewpublished in 2018 showed that whole grain rice was significantly more effective at stabilizing blood sugar levels after eating a meal thanwhite rice.

2. Sugar-sweetened beverages

Sugar-sweetened beverages like soda, sweet tea, and energy drinks lack important nutrients, and they also contain a concentrated amount of sugar in each serving, which can cause blood sugar levels to spike.

3. Fried foods

Fried foods have a lot oftrans fat, a type of fat that has been linked to a higher risk of heart disease.Fried foodslike potato chips, french fries, and mozzarella sticks are also typically high in calories, whichcould contributeto weight gain if overconsumed.

4. Alcohol

People with diabetes are generally advised to limit their alcohol intake. Alcohol can increase the risk oflow blood sugar, especially if consumed on an empty stomach.

5. Breakfast cereal

Most varieties ofbreakfast cerealare very high in added sugar. Some brands pack as much sugar into a single serving as some desserts.

When shopping for cereal, be sure to check the nutrition label carefully and select a variety that is low in sugar. Alternatively, consider opting foroatmealand sweeten it naturally with a bit of fresh fruit.

6. Candy

Candycontains a high amount of sugar in each serving. It typically has a high GI, meaning it’s likely to cause spikes and crashes in blood sugar levels after you eat it.

7. Processed meats

Processed meatslike bacon, hot dogs, salami, and cold cuts are high in sodium, preservatives, and other harmful compounds. Furthermore, processed meats have beenassociated witha higher risk of heart disease.

8. Fruit juice

Although 100% fruit juice can be enjoyed from time to time in moderation, it’s best to stick to whole fruit whenever possible if you have diabetes.

Fruit juicecontains all the carbs and sugar found in fresh fruit, but it lacks the fiber needed to help stabilize blood sugar levels.

Creating a plan

There are several strategies you can use to create a diabetes-friendly, health-promoting, and balanced eating plan.

Plate method

The plate method is a simple and effective way to support healthy blood sugar levels without tracking or measuring your food. It involves you adjusting the portions of certain food groups on your plate to create a nutritionally balanced meal.

To get started, simply fill half your plate withnonstarchy vegetables, such as leafy greens, broccoli, squash, or cauliflower.

One-quarter of your plate should consist ofproteins, like chicken, turkey, eggs, fish, tofu, and lean cuts of beef or pork.

The remaining quarter of the plate should contain a good source of carbohydrates, includingwhole grains, legumes, starchy vegetables, fruit, or dairy products.

Finally, be sure to pair your meal with alow calorie beverage, such as water, unsweetened tea, black coffee, or club soda, to help you stay hydrated.

Glycemic index (GI)

TheGIcan be an effective tool for maintaining blood sugar levels. It’s used to measure how much certain foods increase blood sugar levels and group them as a high, low, or medium GI food based on their effect on blood sugar levels.

If you use this method, stick to foods with a low or medium GI whenever possible, and limit your intake of foods that have a high GI.

You can find more information about the glycemic index and how to use it to improve blood sugar management inthis article.

Carb counting

Carb countingis a popular method used to manage blood sugar levels.

It involves tracking the grams of carbs in the foods you eat daily. In some cases, you may also need to adjust your insulin dosage based on the amount of carbs you consume.

The number of carbs you should eat for each meal and snack can vary quite a bit depending on factors like your age, size, and activity level.

A registered dietitian or doctor can help you create a customized plan for carb counting based on your needs.

Sample menu

Following a diabetes-friendly eating plan doesn’t have to be difficult or time-consuming.

Here’s a 1-day sample menu with some easy meal ideas to help get you started:

Breakfast:omelet with broccoli, mushrooms, and peppersMorning snack:a handful ofalmondsLunch:grilled chicken salad with spinach, tomatoes, avocado, onions, cucumber, and balsamic vinaigretteAfternoon snack:Greek yogurtwith sliced strawberries and walnutsDinner:baked salmon with herb quinoa and asparagusEvening snack:sliced veggies andhummus

Breakfast:omelet with broccoli, mushrooms, and peppers

Morning snack:a handful ofalmonds

Lunch:grilled chicken salad with spinach, tomatoes, avocado, onions, cucumber, and balsamic vinaigrette

Afternoon snack:Greek yogurtwith sliced strawberries and walnuts

Dinner:baked salmon with herb quinoa and asparagus

Evening snack:sliced veggies andhummus

Takeaway

When diabetes is not well managed, it increases your risk of several serious conditions.

Eating foods that help keep blood sugar, insulin, and inflammation in check can dramatically reduce your risk of complications.

But remember, although these foods may help manage blood sugar, the most important factor in healthy blood sugar management is following an overall nutritious, balanced eating plan.

Read this article in Spanish.

How we reviewed this article:

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