

The Worst and Best Foods if You Have Diabetes

Sweet potatoes are great, but sweetened drinks aren't so great

It's often said a healthy diet is your best medicine — and that's especially true if you have diabetes, a condition defined by high levels of blood sugar (glucose).

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What you eat and drink can impact your glucose, which your body uses for energy. Insulin produced by your pancreas is key to using that glucose for energy by transferring it into your cells.

But if you have diabetes, your body isn't producing enough insulin or the insulin being produced isn't working correctly.

Carbohydrates (carbs), protein and fat are the main nutrients in food. Although carbs have the biggest impact on blood sugar levels, as they turn into glucose (sugar) in your body, it's important to make healthy choices when considering all nutrients.

So, what foods should you avoid? And what's good to eat? To get answers, we turn to diabetes specialists Sue Cotey, RN, CDCES, and Andrea Harris, RN, CDCES.

Top foods and drinks to avoid with diabetes

Keeping your blood sugar balanced begins with avoiding processed, calorie-dense foods and beverages. Here are 10 items to keep out of your grocery cart and off your menu.

1. Sweetened drinks

What do most regular sodas, fruit punches and iced teas have in common? They're typically loaded with added sugar and calories while offering little to no nutritional value, emphasizes Cotey.

If you're craving a refreshing beverage with a natural zest, try infusing plain water with different berries and fruits. Lemon water is fabulous and offers multiple health benefits. Ditto for lime water.

2. Specialty coffee drinks

Do you hit the corner café once a day to grab a decadent dose of caffeine? Those lattes, cappuccinos and other special treats can add lots of extra sugar, calories and saturated fat to your daily diet, cautions Harris.

Instead, go for straight coffee served either black, with a dash of artificial sweetener or a small splash of skim milk.

3. Whole milk

Whole milk has a whole lot of calories, sugar and saturated fat — all of which can contribute to weight gain causing increased insulin resistance, says Cotey. You're better off grabbing a low-cal carton of 2%, 1% or (best of all) skim milk.

Unsweetened varieties of almond milk, rice milk or soy milk can be good alternatives to cow's milk — especially if you have a lactose intolerance in addition to diabetes.

4. Hot dogs

This processed meat is high in saturated fat and sodium — a reality that even applies to “healthier” turkey-based hot dogs, notes Harris. Eat them only occasionally (like at a baseball game or picnic) if at all.

5. Pre-packaged lunch meat

Even a thin slice of ham from your supermarket deli can be loaded with saturated fat and sodium. Check for low-sodium lunch meats or — better yet — slice meat you've roasted at home to make your sandwiches, suggests Harris.

Also, remember that sandwich toppings can be unhealthy and problematic. (Example: High-fat mayonnaise). Consider mustard, veggies or a spread of hummus to add extra flavor to your sandwich.

6. Sweetened cereals

Fun-shaped marshmallows on sugar-coated flakes turn breakfast cereal into little more than a carb-loaded sweet treat — and that is NOT the healthiest way to start your day.

There are healthy whole-grain options in the cereal aisle that are lower in sugar and higher in fiber, says Cotey. Spend some time checking nutrition labels for cereals with at least 3 grams of fiber and less than 6 grams of sugar per serving.

7. Regular pancake syrup

Pancake syrup is loaded with sugar and contributes to your daily consumption of carbs. Adding to the concern is that most people also pour far heavier than a “single serving” when covering their flapjacks.

Light or low-calorie syrups usually contain half the carbs of regular varieties, says Harris. That's still a significant amount of carbs, though, so use any syrup sparingly.

8. Sherbet

Many people look at sherbet and see a good alternative to ice cream. The reality? Sherbet typically has almost double the carbohydrates of ice cream, states Cotey.

If you're looking for a frozen treat from time to time, search out a product lower in sugar, carbs and saturated fats. Also be mindful of serving size. Most people scoop out far more than what's recommended.

9. Loaded baked potatoes

A plain baked potato is a relatively healthy food choice. Piling on cheddar cheese, butter, sour cream, ranch dressing and bacon can quickly turn that root vegetable into a high-sodium, fat-laden disaster, says Harris.

The solution? Keep things simple with toppings (lettuce and tomatoes, for instance) and go light on dressings.

10. Fried foods

Deep-fried food such as French fries and fried chicken are not healthy choices. The food absorbs fat during the frying process, which isn't good for your cholesterol, heart health or weight while trying to manage diabetes.

Try baking or broiling your food instead, recommends Cotey. Air fryers that use hot air instead of oil also are a healthier option.

Best foods if you have diabetes

The five foods below all have a low glycemic index, meaning they don't increase blood sugar levels quickly. An added bonus? They're all high in fiber while offering a host of vitamins and nutrients to help you stay healthy.

Sweet potatoes. A great source of vitamin C, potassium and fiber. If you're looking to add extra zing, try a dash of cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg or allspice for extra flavor.

Cruciferous vegetables. The food family includes broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, kale and Brussels sprouts. These non-starchy vegetables are rich in potassium, folate and vitamin C.

Legumes. Get your beans! Whatever version you like — black, garbanzo, kidney, lima, navy, pinto or white, to name a few — you'll be eating a food loaded with fiber and protein to keep you feeling filled up longer.

Nuts. Walnuts, almonds and pecans are heart-healthy and tasty sources of fiber, healthy fats and antioxidants. They're ideal for a quick snack or adding to salads, oatmeal and yogurt. One word of caution, though: Watch your portions, as nuts also can be high in calories.

Berries. They're full of antioxidants, vitamin C and fiber. Plus, they'll add color and tons of flavor when tossed on salads, cereal, summer desserts and yogurt.

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Some sweeteners may have health risks, so it's best to keep your intake moderate

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