



What is Diabetes

Diabetes also called diabetes mellitus is a condition in which the amount of glucose (sugar) in the blood is too high.

A hormone called insulin is normally produced in a gland called the pancreas. Insulin allows glucose in our food to be taken from the blood and used by the body for energy. In people with diabetes either not enough insulin is produced or it is not working properly and therefore glucose builds up in the blood.

Common symptoms

The main symptoms of diabetes are:

- Increased thirst and a dry mouth
- Going to the toilet more often especially at night
- Extreme tiredness
- Weight loss
- Genital itching or regular episodes of thrush
- Slow healing of cuts and wounds
- Blurred vision

There are two types of diabetes:

Type 1 diabetes develops when the insulin-producing cells in the pancreas are destroyed. Type 1 diabetes develops quickly, usually over a few weeks. This type of diabetes usually affects children and young people, but it can appear at any time. Type 1 diabetes must be treated with insulin injections. Only 10% of people with diabetes have Type 1 diabetes and 90% have Type 2 diabetes.

Type 2 diabetes develops slowly over a period of years. The main cause is that the insulin that the body produces doesn't work properly. Type 2 diabetes usually appears in middle-aged or older people although more frequently it is being diagnosed in younger overweight people. The most important factors leading to Type 2 diabetes are being overweight and a strong family history of diabetes.

How is diabetes managed?

The three cornerstones of diabetes management are:

1. Healthy balanced diet
2. Regular physical activity
3. Medication, insulin or both

Good management of diabetes can reduce the risk of developing any further diabetes-related complications including heart attack and stroke, kidney and eye disease and damage to the nervous system.



Help yourself to stay healthy

If you have diabetes, it may be necessary to make some positive changes to your way of life. By following a healthy lifestyle and monitoring your condition, you should be able to continue your normal day-to-day life and take part in activities you have always enjoyed.

Healthy Eating

The diet for people with diabetes is not a special diet. It is the normal healthy diet, which is recommended for everyone - low in fat, sugar and salt, with a lots of fruit and vegetables, fibre and starchy foods, which can be enjoyed by all the family.

Steps to eating well

- ✓ Eat regular meals
- ✓ Eat starchy carbohydrate foods with each meal, such as pasta, potatoes, rice, bread or cereal
- ✓ Eat less sugar and sugary foods
- ✓ Eat less fat and fatty foods
- ✓ Eat more fruit and vegetables
- ✓ Increase your intake of pulses
- ✓ Limit salt intake
- ✓ No need to buy special 'diabetic' foods
- ✓ Keep alcohol to general guidelines for health

Eat regular Meals

It is important to include regular meals each day, try not to skip meals. This will help control your appetite and also help control your blood glucose levels.

Starchy Foods

Starchy carbohydrate foods include bread, chapattis, breakfast cereals, pasta, rice, noodles, yam and potatoes.

These foods provide you with energy, fibre, vitamins and minerals and are recommended at each meal. Eating similar amounts of starchy foods at each meal will help to control your blood glucose levels. The amount of carbohydrate required varies from person to person. Discuss this with your dietitian.

Try to choose high fibre varieties as they improve the digestive system and can be more slowly absorbed e.g. wholegrain bread, like wholegrain, rye or granary.

Eat less sugar & sugary foods

Having diabetes does not mean you need to eat a completely sugar free diet. It is recommended to use sugar-free, no added sugar or diet squashes and diet fizzy drinks. This is because sugary drinks cause blood glucose levels to rise quickly. Sweeteners such as Splenda, Canderel or hermesetas can be used as a replacement for sugar as needed.

Small amounts of sugar can be included as part of a healthy diet. Your dietitian will discuss this with you. If you are trying to loose weight it is important to restrict these foods.

Fats and fatty foods

Eating too many foods which are high in fat will result in weight gain and will increase your risk of heart disease and circulation problems. It is therefore important to cut down on fat particularly saturated fat such as fatty and processed meats, pastry, crisps, chocolate, cake and biscuits and full fat dairy products.

- Use low fat cooking methods e.g. grill, poach, steam, bake or microwave



- Choose unsaturated fats or oils, especially monounsaturated oil sparingly in cooking e.g. Rapeseed or olive oil, these are better for your heart
- Reduce intake of creamy sauces and dressings and use tomato based sauces instead
- Choose lean red meat, poultry without the skin or fish. Oily fish e.g. mackerel sardines, salmon; pilchards are particularly good for you. Try to have at least 2-3 serving oily fish per week.

Eat more fruit and vegetables

Fruit & vegetables are an excellent source of antioxidant vitamins like C, E and beta- carotene. They are rich in soluble fibre, and low in fat. Eating at least 5 portions (e.g. 3 fruit and 2 vegetables) per day can help keep our hearts healthy.

Fruit makes a quick & tasty pudding or snack. Vegetables make an excellent accompaniment to any meal. All fruit are suitable.

A fruit portion example is 10 grapes, 2 plums, a medium grapefruit, a small banana or small handful dried fruit.

Spread your fruit portions out over the day, to avoid high blood glucose levels

Increase your intake of pulses

Pulses such as kidney beans, butter beans, chickpeas, green and red lentils are very good for you. They can help control blood glucose levels and can help reduce blood fats. Try adding them to stews, casseroles, and soups or add to salads.

Salt

Too much salt can increase your blood pressure, which can result in stroke or heart disease.

- Ø Taste your food first as it made be flavoured enough
- Ø Gradually reduce the amount of salt you add at the table and during cooking
- Ø Cut down on salty snacks such as crisps, salted nuts, tortillas etc.
- Ø Use alternatives flavourings like herbs & spices, lemon juice, pepper, garlic, rosemary, thyme etc.
- Ø Choose fresh vegetables and lean meat more often than tinned or processed varieties
- Ø Try to make home cooked meals during the week. If buying ready made meals look for reduced options.

'Diabetic foods'

These foods offer no benefit to people with diabetes. They are expensive and contain as much fat and calories as normal versions. They can have laxative effects and still affect blood glucose levels.

Alcohol

If you drink alcohol do so in moderation. That is no more that two units of alcohol a day for a woman and three units per day for a man. One unit is approximately half a pint of beer or larger, one small glass of wine (125ml). One pub measure of spirit is 1¹/₂ units alcohol. If you are on insulin or tablets, you should seek advice from your diabetes team about your alcohol intake and its effects on blood glucose levels. It is important that you do not drink on an empty stomach.

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Regular physical activity is very important for everyone but especially if you have diabetes:

- Ø Always check with your doctor before starting a new activity



- Ø Aim to exercise at least 30 minutes per day (brisk walking pace)
- Ø If you are on insulin discuss exercise with a member of your diabetes team about food and insulin adjustment

EXERCISE WILL HELP

- Help control blood sugars
- Help with weight reduction. (Essential for good diabetes control)
- Help slow down the progression of diabetes
- Improve cholesterol and blood pressure
- Relieve stress and give you energy
- Tone stomach and strengthen back muscles
- Improve circulation
- Promote a positive mental attitude by releasing endorphines (the 'happy hormones')

Weight management

Maintaining a healthy weight is important for managing your diabetes. It will help to control blood glucose levels, blood cholesterol levels and blood pressure. Carrying excess weight around your middle increases your risk of heart disease. Aim for a realistic weight loss, losing weight slowly over time (0.5-1.0kg (1-2lbs) a week). Speak with your dietitian, doctor, diabetes nurse or practice nurse for ways to lose weight.

Keeping your blood glucose levels under control can greatly reduce the risk of complications related to diabetes. It is important that you attend your diabetes clinic regularly to be monitored and any sign of complications can be dealt with as soon as possible.

Useful Contacts

Diabetes Federation of Ireland (www.diabetes.ie)

76 Lower Gardiner Street
Dublin 2
Tel: 01 836 3022
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Helpline: 1850 909 909
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Diabetes UK (www.diabetes.org.uk)

Macleod House,
10 Parkway, London NW1 7AA
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Email info@diabetes.org.uk

If you want to see a dietitian speak with your doctor or check out our Find a Dietitian Section



Irish Nutrition and Dietetic Institute

Fact Sheet