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MANAGING DIABETES THROUGH DIET

Diet and lifestyle changes are critical for diabetes management. But that doesn't mean your life after a diagnosis has to be bland and joyless – you just need to understand the relationship between your food choices and your blood-sugar levels.

'I have many success stories of patients with uncontrolled diabetes (Type 1 and Type 2) who effectively managed their glucose levels with a diabetic-friendly diet and avoided the complications associated with diabetes,' says Tanya Dippenaar, a registered dietitian at Life Healthcare. 'They are living life to the fullest and are still enjoying their food.'

Tanya says that understanding the way that different foods and daily habits impact your blood-sugar levels will help you to manage your diabetes without a sense of deprivation.

Carbohydrates: Tanya explains that carbohydrate management is pivotal for diabetics, and the type of carbohydrates you consume

matters significantly. Simple carbohydrates, such as those found in sweets, white bread and processed foods, can cause rapid spikes in blood sugar. Complex carbohydrates, found in whole grains and vegetables, cause a more gradual rise. The key to keeping blood-sugar levels stable while eating carbohydrates lies in identifying the different types (simple or complex) and being mindful of your portion sizes.

Fibre: High-fibre foods – including fruit, vegetables and whole grains – are heroes for anyone trying to regulate their blood sugar. Fibre helps to slow glucose absorption into the blood, thus preventing sudden surges. Tanya therefore advocates for a diet rich in fibre.

Protein and fat: Protein has a minimal impact on blood-sugar levels, as do healthy fats such as those found in avocados and nuts. However, excessive consumption of unhealthy fat can contribute to insulin resistance. Portion control and understanding the composition of protein and fat in your meals is therefore essential to the diabetic



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dietary puzzle.

Meal scheduling: The timing of your meals also plays a significant role in blood-sugar management. Eating meals that are regularly spaced out throughout the day will be more beneficial than random snacking, or periods of fasting followed by large portions.

Hydration: Hydration is an often-underestimated aspect of glucose management. As we head into summer, make sure you're drinking adequate water to support your overall bodily functions, and in particular to aid the kidneys in flushing excess glucose.

DEBUNKING DIABETES MYTHS

'Only overweight people get diabetes.' Tanya emphasises that diabetes transcends body types, affecting individuals irrespective of their weight. However, if you are overweight, taking control of your weight management is one of the best things you can do to prevent the onset of Type 2 diabetes.

'Diabetes is easy to control with medication alone.' While medication is essential, it is not a standalone solution. Lifestyle changes, especially in diet, are fundamental to effective diabetes management.

'Brown sugar is healthier than white sugar, syrup or honey.' The truth is that all sugars (and various other nutrients) impact blood-sugar levels. Moderation in sugar intake remains the key.

'Diabetic patients cannot eat carbohydrates or foods containing sugar.' Contrary to popular belief, carbohydrates can be part of a balanced diet. The key lies in portion control and understanding the nature of the carbohydrates consumed.

PRACTICAL TIPS FOR CRAFTING A DIABETIC-FRIENDLY DIET

- Plan balanced meals in advance to ensure each one contributes positively to blood-sugar regulation.
- Choose high-fibre, low-GI foods to prevent rapid blood-sugar spikes.
- Speak to your GP or dietitian about carbohydrate counting in order to match your food intake with your medication effectively.
- Incorporate regular physical activity alongside dietary changes. Exercise significantly impacts insulin sensitivity and blood-sugar regulation. (Consult your healthcare provider about suitable activities for you.)
- Stay hydrated while limiting sugary beverages. Water and herbal teas are a cornerstone of diabetic-friendly hydration.

HOW TO MONITOR YOUR DIABETES-MANAGEMENT PROGRESS

Keep a food diary. Keeping a meticulous food diary, recording meals, portion sizes and times, will provide a comprehensive and objective overview of your dietary choices. By monitoring your blood sugar regularly, especially before and after meals, and adding this data to your food diary, you'll gain real-time insights into the body's response to particular foods.

Consider a Continuous Glucose Monitor (CGM). CGMs offer a dynamic view of blood-sugar trends, aiding you in understanding the impact of different foods over time. These monitors provide valuable data, enabling individuals to make precise adjustments to their diet.

Consult a registered dietitian. 'A dietitian with expertise in diabetes can be an invaluable resource,' says Tanya. 'They can help you understand how different foods affect your blood sugar and create a personalised meal plan.'

The information is shared on condition that readers will make their own determination, including seeking advice from a professional. E&OE.



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