



Diabetes

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5 Food Myths about Diabetes

Diagnosis is more complicated than what you can, cannot eat.

When you're first diagnosed with type 2 diabetes, chances are you start thinking about all the foods you'll have to give up.

Diabetes is a serious disease, causing more deaths each year than breast cancer and AIDS combined, according to the American Diabetes Association. As many as 18.8 million Americans have been told they have the disease. It is not a diagnosis to be taken lightly.

However, being overweight — not necessarily any specific foods you eat — is what puts you at risk for type 2 diabetes. Other important risk factors include genetics, ethnicity and age. Those living with the condition, or those identified as being at risk, need to discuss lifestyle changes with their doctors that go beyond avoiding certain foods.

We asked Angela Ginn-Meadow, a spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, to shine a hard light on some common food assumptions surrounding diabetes. Ginn-Meadow is a certified diabetes educator at the University of Maryland Center for Diabetes & Endocrinology.



Video Spotlight:

[Preventing Diabetes](#)

[Managing Diabetes](#)

Diabetes

5 Food Myths about Diabetes (continued)

Here are five diabetes food myths and what she has to say about these popular misconceptions.

MYTH 1: People with diabetes can't eat sweets.

The evidence has shown that if individuals with diabetes choose to eat foods containing sucrose (sugar), it's OK. Recommended sucrose content of 10 to 35 percent of total energy intake does not have a negative effect on glycemic or lipid responses when substituted for equal amounts of starch.

Sweets can be incorporated in a healthy diet. I recommended my clients make a switch. Choose to limit other carbohydrates in the meal for the sweet treat. Desserts are occasional; aim for once or twice per week.

MYTH 2: Those with diabetes need to follow a special diabetic diet.

There is no such thing as a diabetic diet. The importance of following healthy eating guidelines is the key to living with diabetes. Eating healthy can help you control your ABC's (A1c, blood pressure and cholesterol).

MYTH 3: Eating too many sugary foods causes diabetes.

Diabetes is a disease in which the body either does not make enough insulin or does not use it properly. Consuming excessive sweets can contribute to weight gain. Obesity can be a risk factor for type 2 diabetes.

MYTH 4: Diabetics should fill up on starchy foods like pasta, rice and bread.

Carbohydrates can be found in starch, fruit and milk. Food items that contain carbohydrates can raise your blood glucose. The more a person with diabetes consumes at once, the higher the blood glucose may rise.

Aim for only one-fourth of your plate for the starch (such as rice, pasta, beans, corn, peas, potatoes and lentils).

MYTH 5: Diabetics should stay away from fruit since it is high in fructose.

The body uses carbohydrates as fuel for the brain. Fruit is a carbohydrate but is also rich in vitamins, minerals, fiber and flavor. Fruit is nature's dessert. Aim for 2 to 3 servings each day. Enjoy fruit with a meal or as a snack. The key is the portion size. Limit apples, oranges, pears and peaches to a tennis ball size, consume only one-half of a banana instead of whole, and lastly enjoy 1 cup of berries or melon.

Living with diabetes is not only about what you eat but also how much you eat that can impact your blood glucose. Consume balanced meals with a wide variety of carbohydrates. Use the plate method for portion control. It may also be helpful for you to find an RD CDE (registered dietician certified diabetes educator) in your area to help create a meal plan that allows you to still enjoy some of your favorite foods

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How Diabetes Affects Your Whole Body

Learn why controlling your blood sugar is so important to keeping your whole body healthy, from head to toe.

Diabetes is a lifelong condition that requires constant care. If you do not manage your diabetes well, blood sugar can stay at unhealthy levels and can harm your body.

There are two main types of diabetes. In both types, there is a problem with insulin. Insulin is made in the pancreas to help move glucose (blood sugar) to the cells. The cells then use the sugar as fuel.

In type 1, the immune system has destroyed cells that make insulin. Little or no insulin is released into the blood. People with type 1 diabetes need to take insulin daily to control blood sugar levels.

Type 2 is the most-common form. In this case, the body can't use insulin effectively. This is called insulin resistance. Eventually, the pancreas stops making enough insulin. Age, obesity and inactivity are just some of the risk factors for developing type 2 diabetes.

Some people with type 2 diabetes may be able to control blood sugar levels with diet and exercise. In many cases, diet and exercise alone aren't enough. You may also need to take pills or insulin, or a combination of both. Doctors also may add non-insulin injectable medicines to the mix.

What diabetes does to your body

If insulin can't move sugar from your blood to your cells, your blood sugar levels will rise. Over time, chronic high blood sugar levels take a toll on your body. You may face a host of health problems. Over time, diabetes that is not controlled can affect you from head to toe. Some examples:

Heart. Chronic high blood sugar levels can lead to fatty buildup in your blood vessels. This restricts blood flow



and can cause blood vessels to harden. If a blood clot forms, a heart attack can occur.

Brain. As with blood vessels in the heart, chronic high blood sugar levels can affect blood vessels that carry blood to the brain. This can lead to a stroke. A stroke can cause permanent damage or death. Two out of three people with diabetes die of a stroke or heart disease. People with diabetes also are at higher risk of developing dementia.

Eyes. Over time, uncontrolled diabetes can cause blood vessel damage throughout the body, including in your eyes. Your retina has tiny, fragile blood vessels on it. These blood vessels can swell, weaken and clog. This is called "diabetic retinopathy". In some cases, this can lead to blindness. People with diabetes are also more likely to get cataracts and glaucoma.

Ears. Hearing loss is more common in people with diabetes. It is perhaps because of blood vessel and nerve damage, but studies aren't conclusive.

Mouth. Periodontal, or gum, disease may be worse in people with diabetes. Doctors are still studying possible causes of this.

Skin. You are more at risk of developing skin conditions, such as infections. About a third of people with diabetes have a skin problem at some point.

Nerves. Chronic high blood sugar levels can damage nerves in your arms, legs and vital organs. This is called "diabetic neuropathy". It can cause tingling, numbness or loss of feeling. It can be painful and lead to serious problems, such as infection or amputation. More than half of people with diabetes will have nerve damage.

How Diabetes Affects Your Whole Body *(continued)*

Kidneys. Chronic high blood sugar levels can impair the blood vessels in the kidneys. These blood vessels filter out waste products. Having high blood sugar makes your kidneys work harder. The filtering system may begin to work poorly. If it stops working, the kidneys fail. Diabetes is the main cause of kidney failure.

Stomach. When nerve damage occurs in the stomach, it can cause gastroparesis. With this condition, your stomach cannot properly move food through the digestive tract. Food sits in your stomach for an unpredictable amount of time. That makes blood sugar levels hard to manage.

Bladder. Uncontrolled diabetes can damage the nerves that control bladder function. You may feel the need to urinate often or have some leakage. Other problems may include poor control of sphincter muscles or the inability to fully empty the bladder. More than half of men and women with diabetes have bladder problems.

Reproductive organs. Damage to nerves and blood vessels can lead to sexual problems. Men with uncontrolled diabetes are at risk for erectile dysfunction. They may also have retrograde ejaculation. This can affect fertility, as semen goes into the bladder instead of out through the penis. Women can experience vaginal dryness, pain during sex or a reduced sexual response. Studies also have found lower testosterone levels in men with diabetes. But obesity could be a factor, too.

Legs. Blood vessel damage can lead to narrow or blocked arteries in the legs. This causes a painful condition called peripheral arterial disease (PAD). Not only does PAD cause leg discomfort, but it's also dangerous. PAD increases your risk for heart attack and stroke.

Feet. People with uncontrolled diabetes often have nerve damage and poor blood flow (circulation). Nerve damage can make you lose feeling in your feet. If you step on something sharp, you can get hurt and not know it. Poor circulation makes it difficult for blood to get to your feet to fight off infections. Sometimes, amputation is needed if people have severe foot infections.

How to stay healthy

The above list may alarm you. But many of these health issues can be prevented or minimized. The key is keeping careful control of your blood sugar levels. Your doctor will work with you to develop a personalized plan.

Here are some tips for staying healthy:

- **Eat nutritious foods.** Follow the meal plan created by your doctor or nutritionist.
- **Get regular exercise** with your doctor's permission. Aim for at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic exercise each week. Resistance training at least two times a week is also recommended for people with type 2 diabetes unless you have a condition or symptom that makes this inadvisable.



How Diabetes Affects Your Whole Body *(continued)*

- **Test your blood sugar** as often as recommended by your doctor and keep a record of your readings.
- **Take your medicine as prescribed.** This may include pills, insulin or non-insulin injectable medication. You may also need blood pressure medicines and cholesterol drugs.
- **Brush and floss your teeth.** Brush your teeth with fluoride toothpaste at least twice a day. Floss at least once a day. See your dentist twice a year for regular checkups.
- **Check your feet** each day for scrapes, sores or blisters and report any problems promptly to your doctor. Once a year — or more often if you have foot problems — ask for a comprehensive foot exam. It should include inspection, checking of foot pulses and testing for loss of sensation.
- **Don't smoke.** If you do, get help from your doctor to quit.
- **See your doctor as often as suggested** for checkups. Follow through on recommended tests. And visit an eye doctor annually for a dilated eye exam. Your medical doctor may recommend that you also see other specialists regularly.
- **Get your immunizations.** Talk with your doctor about an annual flu shot. Also ask whether you need a pneumonia shot.



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A Mediterranean-Style Diet May Help Curb Diabetes

A healthy diet can help ward off type 2 diabetes. But following a Mediterranean diet may lower your risk for the disease even more.

Eating habits can have a major effect on your risk for type 2 diabetes. Studies have shown that a Mediterranean diet may be especially good at reducing your chances of developing the disease.

Go Mediterranean

People at a high risk for diabetes can delay or even prevent the disease by losing just 5 to 7 percent of their total body weight. Eating Mediterranean-style can contribute to weight loss — and may even help reduce diabetes risk in people who don't lose weight.

A Mediterranean diet features:

- Lots of plant-based foods, such as vegetables, fruits, nuts and whole grains.
- Monounsaturated fats, especially olive or canola oil.
- Low or moderate amounts of fish, poultry and dairy products.
- Very little red meat.
- Low amounts of saturated fats and trans fat, which are often present in processed foods.
- Low or moderate amounts of red wine.



A Mediterranean-Style Diet May Help Curb Diabetes (*continued*)

How does it work?

People with diabetes don't make enough of the hormone insulin in their bodies or are not able to effectively use the insulin, or both. Obesity makes the body more resistant to insulin. So losing weight through a Mediterranean diet may help you guard against the disease.

In addition, the monounsaturated fats common in the Mediterranean diet don't raise blood cholesterol levels the way saturated fats do. High cholesterol is a risk factor for type 2 diabetes.

Get healthy, stay healthy

Other ways of preventing or staving off diabetes include generally eating well, watching your weight and getting plenty of exercise.

Cut down on the extra sugars, fat and sodium in your diet. Limit fatty cuts of meat, fried foods and full-fat dairy products. For grains, eat only the whole-grain varieties, such as oatmeal, brown rice and whole-wheat breads. Choose colorful vegetables like carrots, sweet potatoes, broccoli and spinach.

Experts recommend getting at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic physical activity each week, spread over at least three days. Brisk walking is an example. And if you have type 2 diabetes and don't have contraindications, try to strength train at least twice a week.

Check with your doctor before beginning or changing an exercise program. He or she will be able to tell you the types and amounts of activities that are suitable for you.

Are you at risk for diabetes?

You have a higher risk for diabetes if you:

- Have a family history of diabetes, especially in a parent or sibling.
- Are overweight.
- Have high blood pressure.
- Have high cholesterol.
- Are age 45 or older.
- Have a history of cardiovascular disease.
- Have A1C equal to or greater than 5.7 percent.

- Had impaired fasting glucose or impaired glucose tolerance in previous tests.
- Had gestational diabetes when you were pregnant or had one or more babies weighing more than 9 pounds at birth.
- Are African-American, American Indian, Asian American, Pacific Islander or Hispanic American.
- Have a sedentary lifestyle — exercising fewer than three times a week.

Prediabetes, a condition in which your blood sugar levels are higher than normal but not high enough to be diabetes, usually has no symptoms. So talk to your doctor if you are concerned about your risk factors.



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