

Food Myths

There are many myths about diabetes, especially when it comes to diabetes and food, which can leave you very confused about what to eat. Here we tell the truth behind some common myths about food and diabetes.

Myth no. 1

Eating too much sugar causes diabetes

Eating too much sugar is not the cause of diabetes. People can develop diabetes for a number of reasons, including genetics (family history, which can't be changed) and lifestyle (which you can change). Being overweight is one lifestyle factor that is strongly linked to type 2 diabetes.

Things you can do to reduce your risk of developing type 2 diabetes and help to manage your weight are:

- Eating foods that are low in both added sugar and saturated fat
- Eating plenty of high fibre foods such as vegetables/salad and wholegrains
- Eating portion sizes that match your activity levels
- Doing regular physical activity

Type 1 diabetes is not caused by your lifestyle. It is an autoimmune condition which means the body attacks the insulin-producing cells in the pancreas. The causes for this autoimmune response are still being looked at in research.

Myth 2

People with diabetes need to follow a special diet

There is no such thing as a special diet for people with diabetes. Healthy eating is the same for all people. Healthy eating will help reduce the risk of developing diabetes and can help you to manage your blood glucose levels if you have diabetes.

Eat foods that are high in fibre and low in added sugars and salt. Replace saturated fats with healthier unsaturated fats such as olive oil, avocado, nuts, and oily fish. Include some wholegrain breads, cereals and grains, plenty of vegetables and legumes, fresh fruit, low fat dairy, lean meats (or vegetarian alternatives) and water. Only eat foods such as sweets, packaged snack foods or takeaway foods on special occasions. If you are diagnosed with diabetes see an Accredited Practising Dietitian for dietary advice that is specific to your needs.

For information see our information sheet '[Food choices for people with diabetes](#)'.

Food Myths

Myth 3

People with diabetes can't eat certain fruits

Fruit may taste sweet but most types of fruit have a low glycaemic index. This means that they are slowly absorbed into the bloodstream, giving a slow rise in blood glucose levels. All types of fruit can be eaten when you have diabetes. The portion of fruit you eat is the most important factor as eating too much fruit can affect your blood glucose levels. Aim to eat 2 servings of fruit every day, and spread this out across the day. One serving of fruit is equal to:

- 1 medium piece (e.g. 1 apple or banana); OR
- 2 small pieces (e.g. 2 small apricots or kiwi fruit); OR
- 1 cup of cut-up fruit pieces.

Myth 4

People with diabetes need to avoid or reduce carbohydrates

Carbohydrates (for example bread, rice and milk) are the body's main source of energy. They help our brain to function well. Wholegrain carbohydrates are a great source of fibre, B-group vitamins and other minerals, so they are part of a healthy food intake.

To help manage your blood glucose levels, choose carbohydrates that are:

- high in fibre
- have a low glycaemic index; and
- are the right portion size for your activity levels.

Everyone's needs are different. For advice on how much carbohydrate you need to eat, talk to an Accredited Practising Dietitian.

For more information see our information sheet '[The Glycaemic Index](#)'.

Myth 5

People with diabetes can't eat sweet foods

Just because someone has diabetes doesn't mean that they have to miss out on cake at a birthday party or the occasional dessert. There is still room for these foods in a healthy balanced diet, combined with regular physical activity. Enjoy these foods on special occasions and in small portions.

Food Myths

Myth 6

All overweight people get diabetes

There are many reasons why people develop type 2 diabetes. Being overweight is just one factor that can increase the risk of type 2 diabetes. Having a family history of type 2 diabetes can also increase your risk. There are many people who are overweight that will never develop diabetes. There are also people who are of a healthy weight, but may still develop diabetes because of other risk factors such as their family history.

For more information about diabetes and the risk factors for its development go to the [‘what is diabetes’](#) section of our website.

Myth 7

People with diabetes need to eat special ‘diabetic’ foods

Gone are the days when people with diabetes needed to buy special ‘diabetic products’, such as artificially sweetened, low joule, diet or sugar free jams, chocolates or biscuits. Healthy eating is the same for all people whether they have diabetes or not. There is no need for these special diabetes foods. These products are often high in saturated fat and kilojoules which is not good for your heart health and weight.

For more information about alternative sweeteners and foods that they are in see our information sheet [‘Alternative Sweeteners’](#).

Myth 8

Low fat foods are high in sugar

Some low-fat foods may have some added sugar to make up the taste and texture when fat is reduced. Examples of this include reduced-fat flavoured yoghurts and reduced fat ice-cream. Compare brands to find the product with the least added sugar. Some reduced-fat foods have no extra added sugars, for example reduced-fat cheese, plain milk and natural or plain yoghurt. It is better to eat the reduced-fat type of these foods to lower your intake of saturated fat (which can increase cholesterol). Remember: portion size is still important – just because a food is labelled as low-fat doesn’t mean you can eat it in large portions.

Food Myths

Myth 9

Diets very high in fat are good for people with diabetes

Whilst it's true that we no longer recommend that everyone eat a low fat diet, this does not mean that people with diabetes should eat fats in large amounts. Fat is the most energy-dense nutrient. Limiting the amount of fat you eat will help to limit extra calories and manage your weight. The most important thing to remember with fats is to choose healthy fats – limit foods high in saturated fat, and replace them with foods high in healthy unsaturated fats. Foods high in saturated fat include processed meats, deep fried take away foods, cream, cakes, biscuits, chocolate, palm and coconut oils. Saturated fats should be limited because they raise your blood LDL (bad) cholesterol levels and make it more difficult for the body's insulin to work properly. Unsaturated fats help to reduce your LDL cholesterol levels and increase your HDL (good) cholesterol levels. Foods high in unsaturated fats include avocado, nuts and seeds, oily fish, and plant oils and margarine spreads such as olive oil, canola, and sunflower oils.

Myth 10

People with diabetes should not eat high GI foods

The glycaemic index (GI) should not be the only thing that you look for when choosing foods. Whilst most low GI foods are the healthier choice (for example multigrain bread or oats compared to white bread and highly processed cereals), this is not always the case. Some low GI foods can still be high in saturated fat and low in nutrients, for example, chocolate and ice cream. On the other hand, some high GI foods can still be an important source of fibre, vitamins, minerals and antioxidants, like potato and watermelon. The total amount of carbohydrate that you eat has the biggest impact on your blood glucose levels, and not the GI alone. Low GI foods eaten in large portions can result in high blood glucose levels. High GI foods eaten in small portions won't always cause high blood glucose levels.

For more advice on your own diet to help manage your diabetes see an Accredited Practising Dietitian. To find a dietitian in your area contact your local community health centre, the Dietitians Association of Australia (www.daa.asn.au) or call the **Diabetes Victoria Helpline on 1300 437 386**.