Healthy Eating for Diabetes

What is diabetes?

Diabetes is when your blood sugar (glucose) levels are higher than normal. This is because your body isn't making enough insulin, or any insulin at all.

After you eat, insulin helps the sugar in your blood move into your cells. This gives you energy.

A healthy lifestyle, including healthy eating can reduce your risk of developing other health conditions such as eye, heart, and kidney diseases.

Healthy eating to manage diabetes

The ideas below can help you to manage your diabetes. If you're ready to make a change, you can choose what works best for you.

Eat 3 meals a day. Space meals 4 to 6 hours apart. Spreading your food over the day helps manage blood sugar.

Snacks may reduce hunger between meals. Include snacks if they help you eat smaller portions at your next meal.

Spread carbohydrates over the day. Your body uses carbohydrate foods for energy. Carbohydrate foods raise your blood sugar. Spreading them over the day helps manage blood sugar.

Carbohydrate foods:

- grains (wheat, oats, rice, barley, rye)
- foods made from grains (bread, tortillas, bannock, naan, roti, pasta, cereal)
- beans, lentils, split peas
- fruits
- starchy vegetables (potatoes, yams, corn, green peas, squash, parsnips)
- milk
- yogurt
- sweet foods, desserts
- sugar (table sugar, honey, and molasses)

Eating a variety of carbohydrate foods can help you get enough calories (energy), fibre, vitamins, and minerals.

Fill your plate like the one below to spread carbohydrates over the day.

- Cover ½ of your plate with non-starchy vegetables. Some non-starchy vegetables are broccoli, bell peppers, carrots, cucumbers, and dark leafy greens. A portion of fruit the size of a tennis ball, or ½ cup (125 mL) may also be included in this part of the plate.
- Put whole grains and starchy vegetables on ¼ of your plate. Some starchy vegetables are potatoes, yams, corn, squash, and parsnips.
- Put protein foods on ¼ of your plate. Some protein foods are meats, fish, eggs, Greek yogurt and tofu.

Portion sizes

Choosing healthy portions of food can help you manage your diabetes. Below is a handy guide to help you choose portion sizes.

- Use **your fist** to guide your portions of grains, starchy vegetables, and fruit. A portion is often ½ cup (125 mL) to 1 cup (250 mL).

- A portion of non-starchy vegetables can be as much as you could hold in **both hands**.

- Use the **palm of your hand** to guide your portions of meat, fish, or poultry.

- A portion of milk is 1 cup (250 mL). A portion of plain or no sugar-added yogurt is ¾ cup (175 mL).

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Eat more fibre

Eating fibre helps you manage your blood sugar levels. Fibre at each meal slows the movement of sugar into your blood. This helps to keep blood sugar from rising too high after eating.

Eating more fibre may also help lower your risk of heart disease. Aim to eat 30 grams (g) of fibre or more each day.

Read the Nutrition Facts table on food packages to find foods higher in fibre. The higher the % Daily Value the more fibre is in one serving.

Nutrition Facts

Per ¾ cup (30 g)

Calories 110	% Daily Value*
Fat 1 g	2 %
Saturated 0.2 g +Trans 0 g	1 %
Carbohydrate 22 g	
Fibre 5 g	20 %
Sugars 4 g	15 %
Protein 3 g	
Cholesterol 0 mg	
Sodium 261 mg	11 %
Potassium 300 mg	6 %
Calcium 22 mg	2 %
Iron 4 mg	30 %

*5% or less is **a little**, 15% or more is **a lot**

Use the tips below to eat more fibre:

- Choose whole grain breads, cereals, crackers, whole wheat pasta, whole wheat couscous, quinoa, barley, oats, and brown rice.
- Sprinkle 1-2 tbsp (15-30 mL) high fibre cereal (4 g of fibre or more per serving) on yogurt, applesauce, salads, casseroles.
- Eat legumes such as split peas, beans, and lentils often. Add them to soups, casseroles, salads, and spaghetti sauce.
- Choose vegetables or fruit at every meal and snack.
- Eat these fruits more often: apples, oranges, berries, pears, cherries, plums.

Drink more fluid when you increase the amount of fibre you eat. Drink at least 9–12 cups (2.25–3 L) of fluid each day. Choose water, unsweetened coffee or tea, and other sugar–free beverages.

Limit sweet foods and foods with added sugar

Sweet foods and foods and beverages with added sugar quickly raise blood sugar. Use the tips below to reduce the amount of added sugar you eat or drink:

- Drink water most often.
- Choose water or sugar-free drinks instead of juice or drinks with added sugar like regular pop, iced tea, and sugar-sweetened coffee and tea drinks.
- Choose whole fruit instead of juice.
- Limit sugar, jam, honey, desserts, candy, syrups, and sweet sauces.
- To sweeten foods like coffee, tea, baking, jams, jellies, and syrups, you can use low-calorie or no-calorie sugar substitutes. Ask your dietitian about using sugar substitutes.

Limit salt intake

- Eat less processed and packaged foods.
- Read the Nutrition Facts tables on food labels to find foods lower in sodium. Choose foods with a lower % Daily Value. 5% is a little, 15% is a lot.
- Add little or no salt when cooking or to food at the table.
- Choose no salt added or salt–free canned goods.
- Use herbs and spices for flavouring instead of salt.

Limit alcohol intake

Drinking less alcohol is better for your health.

Talk to your healthcare team if you have questions about alcohol and your health. For more information, visit ccsa.ca.

Alcohol is high in calories. If you choose to drink alcohol, limit higher sugar drinks like coolers, liqueurs, dessert wines, and mixed drinks.

Choose unsaturated fats

People with diabetes are more likely to get heart disease. Eating more unsaturated fat and less saturated fat can decrease your risk.

Replace saturated fats with unsaturated fats like the ones listed below:

- oils: olive, canola, peanut, sunflower
- soft margarine
- avocado, nuts and seeds, and nut butters
- ground flax seeds, chia seeds, or hemp seeds
- fish instead of other animal proteins

Use the **tip of your thumb** to guide your portions of oils and fats at meals.

Choose less saturated fat

Saturated fat may increase your risk of heart disease. Choose these less often:

- cream and ice cream
- coconut oil, lard, butter, and hard margarine
- processed meat like bacon, wieners, deli meat, and sausage
- deep fried foods
- snack food like chips, salty snacks, baked goods, cookies, donuts, chocolate bars
- processed cheese and cheese spreads

Be active

Activity helps to lower blood sugar by helping the body use sugar for energy.

- Be active for at least 30 minutes each day, 5 to 7 days a week.
- Start with a few minutes a day and build up to 30 minutes.
- Aim for at least 150 minutes (2½ hours) a week of activities that make your heart beat faster, like brisk walking, swimming, bike riding, sports, or running. You should breathe faster but still be able to talk.
- On at least 2 days of the week do muscles strengthening activities using major muscle groups such as lifting weights, using resistance bands, or sit ups, squats, and wall push-ups.

If you haven't been active for a long time, talk to your doctor about your activity plans before you start.

As well as being active 150 minutes a week, it's important to break up sitting time.
Sitting time is time watching TV, playing video games, using the computer at home or work, reading, and doing homework.

Plan to get up and move if you are sitting for more than 30 minutes at a time without moving.

Weight and diabetes

Carrying extra weight can make it harder to manage your diabetes. This handout contains many lifestyle choices for your weight and health. For support with weight and health talk, to your dietitian or doctor.

Next steps

This handout includes lifestyle choices that can help you manage your diabetes. Change can be hard, especially if you try to make too many changes at once. Ask your healthcare provider if you would like support with goal setting.

To learn more, visit ahs.ca/nutritionhandouts and search "setting goals".

For more support

- Talk to your healthcare team.
- Call Health Link at 811 and ask to talk to a dietitian or complete a self-referral form on ahs.ca/811.
- Visit ahs.ca/nutrition or diabetes.ca
- Call, text or chat with 211 Alberta (https://ab.211.ca/). It is a provincial directory of financial benefits, programs, and services.

Sample meal ideas

The meal ideas on this page and the next page show how you can eat to manage your diabetes. These are samples only; they don't replace the advice of your healthcare team. Choose the small or large meal plan based on your appetite. Drink water throughout the day.

Smaller Meal Plan	My Meal Plan
Breakfast	
1 whole grain English muffin 1 cup (250 mL) milk 1 egg scrambled with: ½ ounce (15 g) cheddar cheese ½ cup (125 mL) onions, tomato, mushrooms	
Lunch	
1 cup (250 mL) lentil soup 3–4 whole grain crackers (30 g) ¾ cup (175 g) plain or no sugar added yogurt ½ cup (125 mL) carrots	
Supper	
2½ ounces (75 g) baked salmon ⅔ cup (150 mL) brown rice, cooked 1 cup (250 mL) steamed green beans 1 tsp (5 mL) soft margarine ½ cup (125 mL) sliced tomatoes 1 small pear	

Snacks

If you need help to keep portions smaller at meals, you may need a small snack between meals.

Snacks for a smaller meal plan (each bullet is one snack)	
• 1 apple, sliced, with cinnamon • 3 cups (750 mL) plain popcorn with dill or Italian herbs • 1 cup (250 mL) carrots, celery, cucumbers with 2 Tbsp (30 mL) ranch dressing or ¼ cup (60 mL) hummus • 3–6 (30 g) whole grain or rye crackers	• ¾ cup (175 mL) yogurt, plain or no sugar added • 1 cup (250 mL) milk or fortified unsweetened soy beverage • ¼ cup (60 mL) low sodium cottage cheese with ½ cup (125 mL) pineapple chunks, drained

Larger Meal Plan	My Meal Plan
Breakfast	
1½ cups (375 mL) cooked oatmeal 2 Tbsp (30 mL) ground chia seeds Pinch of cinnamon ½ cup (125 mL) berries 1 cup (250 mL) milk	
Lunch	
Chicken sandwich with: 2 slices of whole grain bread 2½ ounces (75 g) chicken breast, sliced 1 ounce (30 g) mozzarella cheese ⅙ avocado, sliced ½ cup (125 mL) lettuce 1 Tbsp (15 mL) mustard ½ cup (125 mL) cucumber, sliced 1 cup (250 mL) milk 1 medium apple	
Supper	
2½ ounces (75 g) lean steak 1 cup (250 mL) baked yams or sweet potato ½ cup (125 mL) roasted cauliflower 1 cup (250 mL) mixed greens 2 Tbsp (30 mL) sunflower seeds 1 Tbsp (15 mL) dressing 1 cup (250 mL) milk 15 grapes or 1 cup (250 mL)	

Snacks

If you need help to keep portions smaller at meals, you may need a small snack between meals.

Snacks for a larger meal plan (each bullet is one snack)	
• 1 cup (250 mL) carrots, celery, cucumbers with ¼ cup (60 mL) hummus • 2–3 rye crackers and 1 ounce (30 g) cheese • 1 slice of whole grain toast with 1 Tbsp (15 mL) nut butter, and ½ banana sliced on top • ¼ cup (60 mL) unsalted nuts	• ¾ cup (175 mL) plain Greek yogurt with ½ cup (125 mL) sliced strawberries, and ⅓ cup (75 mL) high fibre cereal • 1 (30 g) high fibre granola bar (4 g of fibre or higher) • ½ tuna sandwich

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