

# What Makes for a Good Type 2 Diabetes Diet? Foods to Eat and Avoid, Best and Worst Diet Plans, How to Cut Carbs, and Everything Else to Know

There's no one-size-fits-all diabetes diet per se, but understanding how to make smart food choices is essential for keeping blood sugar in a healthy range.



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Last Updated: February 23, 2018



An excellent diabetes diet consists of all the key food groups, including fruits, veggies, healthy fat, and protein.<sup>1</sup>Stock

Living well with diabetes means taking your medication as prescribed, managing stress, exercising regularly, and, equally important, knowing what foods are good and bad for keeping your blood sugar levels in a healthy range. (1,2,3)

If you've just been diagnosed with type 2 diabetes, the prospect of giving up the foods you love may seem daunting or even devastating. But you may be relieved to know that a good diet for type 2 diabetes isn't as complex or out of the ordinary as you might expect.

## **What Is a Good Diet for Type 2 Diabetes?**

In fact, a smart diabetes diet looks a lot like the healthy eating plan doctors recommend for everyone: It includes eating lots of fiber-rich fruits and vegetables, enjoying whole-grain carbohydrates in moderation, fueling up with lean protein, and eating a moderate amount of healthy fats. (3) What it boils down to is that "There is no 'diabetic diet,'" says Erin Palinski-Wade, RD, CDE, author of *2 Day Diabetes Diet* and *Belly Fat Diet For Dummies*, and based in Vernon, New Jersey. "The guidelines are basically the same for healthy eating for everyone, with or without diabetes," she says.

Still, eating when you have diabetes requires taking some steps that are specific to the disease. Though there isn't a one-size-fits-all eating plan, knowing the basics is key for maintaining a high quality of life, reducing the risk of complications, and potentially even reversing diabetes. (4, 5)

**RELATED: Diabetes Food Advice You Should — and Shouldn't — Follow to Manage Blood Sugar**

# Why Is It Important to Eat Well When Managing Type 2 Diabetes, and What Are the Risks if You Don't?

Type 2 diabetes is characterized by a condition called insulin resistance, where the body can't effectively use the hormone insulin to ferry glucose (blood sugar) to cells and muscles for energy. This causes glucose to accumulate in your blood at higher than normal levels, which can put your health in danger. (6)

Picking the right amounts of the right foods can help lower blood sugar levels and keep them steady, reducing diabetes symptoms and helping lower the risk for health complications, such as nerve damage, vision problems, heart disease, kidney damage, and stroke. (7)

## **RELATED: How to Prevent Type 2 Diabetes Complications**

Eating well can also help you lose and maintain a healthy weight. In fact, losing just 5 to 7 percent of your body weight may help you better control type 2 diabetes, or prevent prediabetes from progressing into the full-blown form of the disease. (8)

Rather than trying to overhaul your lifestyle with quick fixes, create lasting habits by focusing on small, simple, and maintainable changes, Palinski-Wade says. Otherwise, you may feel overwhelmed and revert to your old, unhealthy eating ways — and regain weight you've lost. "Being consistent with change, no matter how small, is key to long-term weight loss success," she adds. Here are four to get you started:

Pack in more veggies. Add in one extra serving of nonstarchy vegetables at dinner. Consider adding vegetables to a snack, too.

Fit in more fruit. Research shows that eating berries, apples, and pears is associated with weight loss. (9) Go figure, these are especially fiber-rich choices. Of course, all other fruits count, too — just be sure to factor them into your carbohydrate servings.

Stay active. Ultimately, you should aim to be active 150 minutes per week (that's just 30 minutes five days per week). But initially, start out by walking 15 minutes a few times per week, and adding on time from there. This handy chart will show you how to build up slowly.

Nibble on something in the morning. Eating breakfast is one habit of long-term weight-losers. (10) A plain yogurt with fruit, nuts and fruit, or scrambled eggs and whole-grain toast are all diabetes-friendly breakfasts.

### **RELATED: 7 Easy Breakfast Ideas for People With Type 2 Diabetes**

People who are overweight or obese are at a greater risk for developing diabetes in the first place. Being overweight or obese is also linked with increased risk of conditions such as certain types of cancer, osteoarthritis, fatty liver disease, and the aforementioned diabetes complications. (11)

## **Is It Important to Monitor Caloric Intake if You Have Diabetes?**

While it can be helpful, it's not absolutely necessary to track how many calories you're taking in daily. "Although tracking calories can be beneficial when it comes to weight reduction, you can lose weight and still have a poor nutritional quality to your diet," Palinski-Wade points out.

Therefore, if you do count calories, make sure you're also focused on healthy-food choices. You can also track your food intake, she says, which will let you "monitor portions as well as how certain foods and mealtimes impact blood glucose levels," she says.

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) recommends the following calorie guidelines for people who are managing diabetes: (12)

- About 1,200 to 1,600 calories a day for small women who are physically active, small or medium-sized women interested in weight loss, or medium-sized women who are not physically active
- About 1,600 to 2,000 calories a day for large women interested in weight loss, small men at a healthy weight, medium-sized men who aren't physically active, or medium-sized or large men interested in weight loss
- About 2,000 to 2,400 calories a day for medium-sized or large men who are physically active, large men at a healthy weight, or a medium-sized or large women who are very physically active

## **How Cutting Carbs Can Help You Stabilize Unbalanced Blood Sugar Levels That Result From Diabetes**

The best course of action is managing the amount of carbohydrates you eat. “Although individual carbohydrate goals will vary based on age, activity level, medication, and individual insulin resistance levels, it’s imperative to avoid having too many carbohydrates in one sitting,” says Palinski-Wade. For reference, if you have prediabetes or type 2 diabetes and don’t take medication, cap carbs to no more than 60 grams (g) per meal (four carbohydrate servings).

The best sources of carbohydrates for someone with diabetes are fiber-rich sources from whole foods, which can help improve glucose control. These include fruits, vegetables, fat-free or low-fat dairy, and whole grains. Limit sugar and refined grains, like white bread and pasta.

## **Why You Should Include Fiber in Your Diabetes Meal Plan**

An excellent way to trim your waistline and stabilize blood sugar is reaching

for foods high in fiber. Fiber isn't digested by the human body, so fiber-rich foods with carbohydrates do not raise blood sugar levels as quickly because they are processed more slowly. Fiber-rich foods can also help you feel fuller for longer, aiding weight loss, helping prevent obesity, and maybe even warding off conditions such as heart disease and colon cancer. (13)

Unfortunately, most adults don't eat enough fiber. (14) Whether a person has diabetes or not, they should aim to follow the same recommendations. Women should get at least 25 g of fiber per day, while men need at least 38 g per day, Palinski-Wade says.

## **What Are the Best Sources of Carbohydrates for People With Type 2 Diabetes?**

You can find carbohydrates in whole grains, fruits, vegetables, legumes and beans, and dairy. Don't shy away from them, either, as they supply necessary vitamins, minerals, and fiber, the NIH points out. (15) Good sources of carbs include:

- Whole grains, like whole-wheat pasta and bread, brown rice, oatmeal, and quinoa
- Nonstarchy veggies, like peppers, eggplant, onion, and asparagus
- Starchy veggies are okay to eat in moderation, just mind the carbohydrate content. Examples include sweet potatoes and corn.
- Nonfat or low-fat dairy, like unsweetened yogurt and cottage cheese
- Beans and legumes, like black beans, chickpeas, and lentils

**RELATED: 5 Tricks for Getting Enough Fruits and Veggies**

## **What Are the Best Types of Proteins When Managing Type 2 Diabetes?**

One-quarter of your plate should contain a source of lean protein, which includes meat, skinless poultry, fish, reduced-fat cheese, eggs, and vegetarian sources, like beans and tofu. (3) Enjoy these diabetes-friendly options: (16)

- Beans, including black or kidney beans
- Hummus
- Lentils
- Edamame
- Nut butter
- Tofu
- Fish, such as tuna, sardines, or salmon
- Skinless poultry
- Eggs
- Low-fat or fat-free cottage cheese
- Reduced-fat cheese or regular cheese in small amounts
- Lean beef, like sirloin or tenderloin

## **What Are the Best Sources of Healthy Fats if You Have Type 2 Diabetes?**

Fat is not the enemy, even if you have diabetes! The key is being able to tell unhealthy fats from healthy fats and enjoying them in moderation, as all fats are high in calories.

But type matters more than amount: Aim to limit saturated fat to no more than 10 percent of total calories, Palinski-Wade advises.

Consider opting for these sources of healthy fat, per the American Diabetes Association (ADA): (17)

- Avocado
- Oils, including canola, corn, and safflower
- Nuts, such as almonds, peanuts, and walnuts
- Olive oil
- Seeds, including sesame, pumpkin, and sunflower

## **What Are the Best Sources of Dairy When You Have Type 2 Diabetes?**

The goal with dairy is to choose sources that are nonfat or low-fat (1 percent) to save on saturated fat. Also, remember that while these sources offer protein, they are also another source of carbs, so you need to factor them into your carb allotment.

- Nonfat or 1 percent milk
- Nonfat or low-fat plain yogurt (as well as Greek yogurt)
- Nonfat or low-fat cottage cheese
- Nondairy milk, like soy milk or almond milk
- Reduced-fat cheese

**RELATED: Yogurt for Diabetes: How Does Yours Stack Up?**

## **What Are the Best Grains for People With Type 2 Diabetes?**

Don't fear grains either — they're a great source of heart-healthy fiber. Aim to make at least half of your grain intake whole grains. (3) Here are some great options:

- Old-fashioned or steel-cut oats
- 100 percent whole-wheat bread, wraps, or tortillas
- Whole-grain cereal (without added sugar)
- Quinoa
- Brown rice
- Farro
- Whole-grain pasta
- Barley
- Bulgur
- Millet
- Wild rice

## **What Are the Healthiest Condiments for Managing Type 2 Diabetes?**

Sugar hides in many condiments, like ketchup, BBQ sauce, and marinades. Always read the label, and choose the lower-sugar option that best fits in with your diet and goals. Here are a few condiments suggested by the ADA that boost the flavor of foods without causing a sugar overload. (18,19)

- Mustard (Dijon or whole-grain)
- Salsa

- Olive oil
- Vinegar, including balsamic, red or white wine, or apple cider varieties
- Spices and herbs
- Light salad dressing (without added sugar)
- Hot sauce
- Hummus

## **The Best Foods to Eat Regularly if You Are Living With Type 2 Diabetes**

Certain foods are considered staples in a type 2 diabetes diet. These are foods that are known to help control blood sugar and promote a healthy weight. They include:

- Fiber-rich fruits and nonstarchy vegetables, such as apples and broccoli
- Lean sources of protein, such as boneless, skinless chicken, turkey, and fatty fish, like salmon
- Healthy fats, such as peanut butter, nuts, and avocado (in moderation)
- Whole grains, like quinoa and barley
- Nonfat or low-fat dairy, like milk and plain yogurt

## **The Top Foods to Limit or Avoid if You Have Type 2 Diabetes**

Likewise, certain foods are known to throw blood sugar levels out of whack and promote unhealthy weight gain. Foods that should be limited or avoided if you have type 2 diabetes include:

- Chips
- Cookies
- Cake
- White bread and pasta
- Canned soups, which are high in sodium
- Microwaveable meals, which are also high in sodium
- Candy
- Sources of saturated fat, like bacon or fatty cuts of meat

**RELATED: The Best and Worst Foods to Eat in a Type 2 Diabetes Diet**

## **Common Diabetes Food Myths You Shouldn't Believe**

With all the info out there on how you should or shouldn't eat, it's easy to get caught up in false information. Here are several myths to ignore, starting now:

You can never have your favorite foods again. Not true — even if it's a sugary cupcake or white bread. "Although no one should make these foods a regular part of their meal plan, there are no foods that are entirely off limits with diabetes," Palinski-Wade says.

Sugar is bad. Eat no more than 10 percent of your total calories from added sugars, Palinski-Wade recommends. This is no different than the guidelines for everyone, meaning you can still enjoy a few bites of dessert if you'd like.

**RELATED: The Truth About Eating Sugar and Your Risk for Type 2 Diabetes**

You shouldn't eat fruit. The positive news about berries, apples, and melons (in addition to numerous other types of fruit) is that they contain health-promoting vitamins, antioxidants, and fiber, points out Palinski-Wade. Fruit can definitely be part of your diabetes diet.

You have to make yourself a separate meal. Diabetes is not a sentence to eat boring, bland foods. You can eat the same food as your family, and even add in special foods here and there, according to the Joslin Diabetes Center. (20)

## **Going Low-Carb for Diabetes: Does It Work?**

Carbs have been traditionally looked at as the enemy of people with type 2 diabetes, but they don't have to be. You can still eat carbs — including grains — on a diabetes eating plan, says Palinkski-Wade. The key is to get those carbs from smart sources (whole grains, legumes, fruit, dairy), limit your carb intake to no more than 60 g per meal (in general), and space them out throughout the day for best blood sugar control.

But if you are interested in going low-carb, there is some evidence that this type of diet plan can be beneficial to those with type 2 diabetes. For instance, a preliminary research review in 2017 found that a low-carb plan helped adults with diabetes lower their triglyceride levels and boost “good” HDL cholesterol. It may also have mind-body benefits, as people said they were less stressed and happier between meals. (21) Another review concluded that low-carb diets drop blood glucose levels and allow people to use less medication, or eliminate it completely. The authors recommend it as a first-line treatment for diabetes. (22)

While the benefits are exciting, if you do go low-carb, be aware of the risks, which include nutrient deficiencies. You may also not get enough fiber if you're not eating enough nonstarchy vegetables. Eating too much protein can also compromise kidney health. (23)

**RELATED: Is a Low-Carb or Low-Fat Diet Better for Weight Loss?**

## **What Are the Best Popular Diet Plans for People Managing Type 2 Diabetes?**

Healthy eating, following the guidelines below on building a diabetes meal plan, and focusing on making nutritious choices most of the time can help you shed weight.

Working with a registered dietitian who is also a certified diabetes educator can help you reach your goal weight while meeting all of your nutritional needs.

That said, you may like the direction offered by a diet plan. The two that are suggested for people with diabetes time and time again are the Mediterranean diet and the DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) diet. Unlike so-called “diets” (many of which are designed only for the short term), these eating approaches aim to set the foundation for building and maintaining lifelong habits.

Palinski-Wade favors the Mediterranean diet because “it’s been researched for decades and has been shown to be beneficial at reducing the risk of heart disease,” she says. That’s important because people with diabetes are up to four times more likely to die from heart disease compared with adults without diabetes.

Following the Mediterranean diet, you’ll focus on whole foods in the form of fruits and vegetables, whole grains, olive oil, legumes, nuts, and poultry and fish, while limiting red meat. (24)

Another diet option to consider is the DASH diet. “The DASH diet has been found to be beneficial at reducing blood pressure levels, a key risk factor for heart disease and kidney disease. Because both of these disease risks are elevated with diabetes, this style of eating may promote a reduction in the risk of comorbid conditions associated with diabetes,” Palinski-Wade explains.

Similar to the Mediterranean diet, the DASH diet promotes eating fruits and vegetables, whole grains, fish and poultry, beans, nuts, as well as fat-free or low-fat dairy. You’ll also cap sodium to 2,300 milligrams (mg) per day (1,500 mg if advised by a doctor). (25)

## **What Are Some Diet Plans That May Benefit People With Type 2 Diabetes?**

While it's best to talk to your doctor before starting any diet plan, it's especially important to talk to them if you're interested in the following:

**Ketogenic Diet** You'll eat very few carbs on this plan (20 to 50 g a day) to achieve a state of ketosis, where your body burns fat for fuel instead of carbs. "There is some research that suggests ketogenic diets may help to reduce insulin resistance and improve blood glucose levels," says Palinski-Wade. Indeed, one study of adults with type 2 diabetes who followed a ketogenic diet for 10 weeks improved glycemic control and helped patients lower their dosage of medication. (26) Still, it's a controversial diet, so make sure to weigh the pros and cons with your physician.

#### **RELATED: What Is the Ketogenic Diet? Here's Everything You Need to Know**

**Intermittent Fasting (IF)** IF asks you to limit the time you eat to a certain number of hours per day, or to eat a very low number of calories on certain days. And limited research (small studies and animal trials) have shown benefits to fasting glucose and weight. That said, skipping meals may hinder blood sugar control or cause low blood sugar (hypoglycemia), especially if you're on insulin, so talk to your doctor about the risks and benefits before attempting.

**Paleo Diet** The premise of this plan is to eat like our hunter-gatherer ancestors, focusing on fruits, vegetables, nuts, lean meat, and certain fats. (It eliminates grains, legumes, and most dairy.) One study in 2015 found that both paleo diets and the guidelines from the ADA improved glucose control in patients with type 2 diabetes — though the paleo dieters came out on top. (27)

**RELATED: What Is the Paleo Diet? If It's Good for Diabetes, What to Eat, and Benefits and Risks**

## **What Are the Worst Popular Diet Plans for People Living With Type 2 Diabetes?**

Any diet that is gimmicky, not backed by research, is too restrictive, or makes too-good-to-be-true promises (like losing X amount of weight in a certain amount of time) is worth skipping.

Examples include juice fasts, cleanses or detoxes, the cabbage soup diet, the military diet, and the Body Reset Diet. (The last ranked #40 out of 40 of diets analyzed by *U.S. News & World Report's* rankings of best diets for diabetes.) (28)

**RELATED: US News' Best Health and Weight Loss Diets for 2018**

## 4 Tips for Building a Good Diabetes Meal Plan

Your first stop should be connecting with a registered dietitian who is a certified diabetes educator — search for one near you at [EatRight.org](http://EatRight.org) — and your primary doctor to figure out how many carbohydrates you should eat per meal based on your individual needs, says Palinski-Wade. From there, follow these steps:

Know “like” foods. Use a diabetes exchange list, which tells you how foods compare in terms of their carbohydrate content. For instance, 1 apple and ½ cup applesauce both contain about 15 g of carbs. (29) Or learn how to count carbohydrates — a system of thinking of carbohydrates in foods in 15 g units. This will help you determine proper portions.

Use the Create Your Plate tool. When you're just getting started, it's helpful to envision exactly what your plate should look like. The ADA has a Create Your Plate tool that will help immensely. (30) With enough practice, this will become second nature. They recommend filling half your plate with nonstarchy vegetables (broccoli, spinach, tomatoes), one-quarter with grains (preferably whole) or starchy foods (sweet potato, plantain), and another quarter with lean protein (beans, seafood, skinless chicken).

Top it off. A smart addition to the meal is a serving of fruit or nonfat or low-fat dairy. Drink water or unsweetened tea or coffee.

Season right. Using salt on your foods is fine (and enhances the flavor), but watch how much you add. Aim for less than 2,300 mg of sodium per day (and less than 1,500 mg daily if you have heart disease). (31) Using dried herbs and spices is another way to add sodium-free flavor to foods for no calories. (32)

## **A Diabetes Diet Sample Menu to Follow**

### **Day 1**

**Breakfast:** Veggie omelet (1 whole egg plus 2 egg whites), topped with reduced-fat cheese, plus fruit

**Snack:** Plain, nonfat or low-fat Greek yogurt and berries

**Lunch:** Salad (dark lettuce or leafy greens) topped with chicken breast and chickpeas with olive oil and vinegar dressing

**Snack:** Celery and carrot sticks with nut butter

**Dinner:** Grilled salmon, steamed broccoli, and quinoa

### **Day 2**

**Breakfast:** Fruit smoothie made with low-fat milk, yogurt, and chia seeds (optional)

**Snack:** Unsalted almonds with a piece of fruit

**Lunch:** Turkey chili with reduced-fat cheese

**Snack:** Sliced vegetables and hummus

**Dinner:** Tofu and veggie stir-fry over brown rice

### **Day 3**

**Breakfast:** Old-fashioned or steel-cut oatmeal topped with fruit and nuts

**Snack:** Roasted chickpeas

**Lunch:** Turkey sandwich on whole wheat with sliced veggies

**Snack:** Fat-free or low-fat cottage cheese with a sliced peach

**Dinner:** Tray bake (all foods baked on the same tray) made with shrimp and roasted vegetables

**RELATED: [The 8 Best Snacks for Blood Sugar Control](#)**

### **3 Simple Tips for Dining Out With Type 2 Diabetes**

It can seem tough to navigate a menu when you're eating out, but it's not impossible. Enjoy your time with friends and eat delicious food with these guidelines from Palinski-Wade:

Have an app before you leave. It's tempting to "save up" calories throughout the day to help plan for a night out, but that approach can backfire. You'll be famished by the time you get there and less likely to make a healthy choice when you order. Eat a small, healthy snack before you go, like some nuts or a low-fat plain yogurt. "This can help decrease hunger and prevent overeating" she says.

Envision your plate. Ideally, your plate should look very similar to how it does at home — with a couple of small tweaks: 1/2 vegetables (steamed if possible), 1/4 lean protein, and 1/4 whole grains. "You want to be careful not to eat too many carbs at one sitting, and avoid meals packed with saturated fat," says Palinski-Wade.

Sip smart. Alcohol stokes your appetite, so if you do have alcohol (make sure to talk to your doctor first if you're on medication), do so near the end of the meal. Limit it to one glass.

**RELATED: 9 Dining-Out Tips for People With Diabetes**

## **How to Find Extra Help Building a Type 2 Diabetes-Friendly Diet**

If you have diabetes, you already know how helpful having a strong support system can be. But that network should extend beyond just your friends and family. That's where that registered dietitian or certified diabetes educator comes into play.

"Diabetes is a very individual disease. Depending on factors like your age, activity level, insulin resistance, and medication, your dietary goals and carbohydrate goals can vary greatly," Palinski-Wade explains.

A professional who knows nutrition and diabetes inside and out can help you create a plan that meets your goals for weight loss and glucose levels, but isn't so restrictive that you can't enjoy your favorite foods, she adds.

## **The Best Websites or Blogs for Type 2 Diabetes Meal Inspiration**

- A Sweet Life
- Diabetes Self-Management
- Low Carb Maven

## **5 Excellent Books That Offer Type 2 Diabetes-Friendly Recipes**

- *The Type 2 Diabetic Cookbook & Action Plan: A Three-Month Kickstart Guide for Living Well with Type 2 Diabetes* by Martha McKittrick, RD, CDE and Michelle Anderson
- *Diabetes Weight Loss: Week by Week — A Safe, Effective Method for Losing Weight and Improving Your Health* by Jill Weisenberger, RD, CDE
- *Diabetic Cookbook for Two: 125 Perfectly Portioned, Heart-Healthy, Low-Carb Recipes* by Jennifer Koslo, RD
- *Eat What You Love Diabetic Cookbook: Comforting, Balanced Meals* by Lori Zanini, RD, CDE
- *The American Diabetes Association Diabetes Comfort Food Cookbook* by Robin Webb

**RELATED: 13 Books That Can Help You Live Better With Diabetes**

## **Putting It All Together: Why Diet Choices Are Key for Type 2 Diabetes Management**

Your diet is one of the main pillars of good diabetes control. “What you eat can help or hinder insulin resistance,” says Palinski-Wade.

While it seems like there is a lot to remember, the basic tenets boil down to simple, nutritious eating.

In the end, you can cut through the noise by considering a few things when you sit down to eat: Aim for “a well-balanced diet limited in simple sugars and rich in whole plant-based foods, such as vegetables and fruit, along with lean proteins, whole grains, and healthy, plant-based fats,” she says.

Remember that and you don’t need to follow a ton of rules — even when you have type 2 diabetes.

