

A vibrant still life photograph of fresh produce. In the foreground, a bright red tomato sits on the left, partially overlapping a bunch of green basil leaves. To the right, a yellow flower with ruffled petals is visible. The background is filled with more colorful flowers, including a large pink one and another yellow one. The overall composition is bright and fresh, with a focus on natural, healthy ingredients.

Healthy Eating for Everyone

Variety is the key

For those who haven't heard, a diabetes diagnosis is not the beginning of a lifetime full of bland, virtually identical types of boring foods. In fact, people with diabetes can and generally should eat what is considered a healthy diet for everyone else. Their focus should be on what to eat, how much to eat, and when to eat. In other words: plan your meals well and you will enjoy them more.

A statement from the Food Standards Agency says it best: “There are no foods that people with diabetes should never eat.” In fact, the description of what should be on the plate sounds a lot like what most people are hearing from their doctors: A diabetic diet should be low in fat, sugar and salt; and high in fruits, vegetables and starchy foods such as pasta, according to the FSA.

The reality is that because people with diabetes have to closely watch their blood sugar, or glucose levels, they are often overly concerned about sugar consumption. There is no need to cut out all sugar. But, like everyone else, people with diabetes should try to eat only small amounts of foods that are high in sugar or fat.

UK nutritionist, dietician and best-selling author Azmina Govindji states that up to 10% of the calories in a diet for a person with diabetes can consist of sugar. “However, when and how it is ingested is important.” For example, Govindji says a dessert containing sugar should be eaten with or shortly after the consumption of high-fibre foods, such as chunky peanut butter on a multi-grain roll. “The bread and the peanut butter are digested slowly, which means the dessert will be more slowly digested than if it were eaten on its own.”

In other words, the sugar should be consumed with foods that have a low or medium glycaemic index, or GI. GI is used as a measure of how quickly carbohydrate foods raise blood glucose levels. This is important because choosing slowly absorbed carbohydrates can help even out blood glucose levels for those with diabetes.

Govindji, author of the “GI Plan” and “The 30-Minute Diabetes Cookbook”, says high-fibre foods generally have a low GI. Digestion of foods such as basmati rice and pasta – both with low to medium GIs – is also relatively slow, thereby easing the pace of sugar absorption. Experts say the structure and the texture of a carbohydrate generally indicates its GI rating (See chart).

TYPICAL GI RATINGS FOR COMMON FOODS

High (above 70)	White and wholemeal bread Brown rice Cornflakes Baked potato Mashed potato
Medium (between 55 and 70)	Basmati rice Honey Jam Weetabix Ice cream New potatoes
Low (up to 55)	Apples, oranges, pears, peaches Beans and lentils Pasta (from durum wheat) Barley Porridge Custard

Source: Diabetes UK



Govindji, the former dietician for Diabetes UK, points out that since around 75% of people with type 2 diabetes are overweight, shedding pounds should be a priority, and diets like the GI Plan can help. “It is a perfectly acceptable way for people with diabetes to lose weight, as part of a healthy lifestyle” she says, noting that those interested in a diet should consult their dietician or doctor if in doubt.

The principles of the GI concept have been used for decades in dietary planning for people with diabetes. More recent research, however, has shown that everyone can benefit from eating such foods, a reason why Govindji decided to write her book. She says that as long as a diet is healthy, “we do not recommend that people with diabetes eat any differently than people without diabetes.” So, eating low GI foods can be part of a healthy diet for >>>

>>> everyone, according to the author. She cites the high fibre and antioxidant content of many low-GI foods (such as whole grains, pulses, fruit, vegetables, nuts and seeds) as examples of foods with health benefits. These types of foods may also help control appetite, leading to steady weight loss.



HOW GI IS MEASURED

Foods are given a GI number according to their effect on blood glucose levels. Glucose or white bread (50g) is used as the standard reference (GI 100), and other foods are measured against this by comparing the effect of a 50g portion of the test food on blood glucose levels over a three-hour period with the effect of either glucose or white bread over the same time. It was previously thought that if one ate the same amount of carbohydrate, whatever it was, it would have the same effect on blood glucose levels. Now it is accepted that different carbohydrates have different effects on blood glucose levels. For instance, 30g of bread carbohydrate does not have exactly the same effect as 30g of fruit or pasta carbohydrate.

While this all sounds straightforward enough, GI ratings for a single food do not always tell consumers how fast the carbohydrate is absorbed. The number merely indicates how quickly or slowly a food raises blood glucose when eaten on its own. In practice, people usually eat foods in combination during meals: bread with butter or

margarine, or potatoes with meat and vegetables. Also, how a food is cooked – fried or grilled, for example – and the ripeness of a fruit or vegetable can affect its GI.

MORE TO LIFE THAN GI

Eating only a few low GI foods should not be your goal. Such a diet could even be counter-productive. Variety is the key: A wide range of foods – not just the starchy ones like pasta – should be consumed so people receive all the proper nutrients. For example, most dieticians recommend five servings of fruits or vegetables a day.

Since man does not live on bread and vegetables alone, one must consider meat and dairy products. Both should be low in saturated fats, which are found in fatty meat, full dairy goods, butter and lard. Healthier foods are lean meat, skinless poultry, fish and low-fat dairy products like skimmed milk. Also, tomato based sauces should be preferred to those with cream due to its high fat content. Some foods are said to be produced specifically for people with diabetes, which generally is not the case. In fact, both Diabetes UK and the FSA advise people with diabetes to steer clear of such products because they are often the type of high-sugar sweets and biscuits which everyone should avoid, or they are more expensive than “normal” products even though there is little difference.

MONITORING DRINK CONSUMPTION

The FSA recommends people with diabetes take special care to watch how much fruit juice they consume. “Drinking very large amounts of fruit juice could cause problems with blood sugar for some people with diabetes, because of the fruit sugar (fructose) it contains.”

Another liquid that can also cause problems is alcohol. “The good news is as a general rule there is no need to give up alcohol just because you have diabetes,” says Diabetes UK. Their recommendations are in line with those for the



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LOW GI MEAL PLAN IDEAS

Combining foods with different GIs alters the overall GI of a meal, so try to include low GI food with each meal.

Snacks

- Get into the habit of eating fruit as a snack (as well as part of a main meal)
- Yoghurt – note fruit yoghurts are high in sugar
- Popcorn
- Go easy on lower GI foods like chocolate and nuts, which have a high fat content, especially if you are trying to lose weight
- Rye bread and fruit loaf.

Breakfast

- Use an oat-based breakfast cereal and eat some fruit
- Muesli, All Bran.

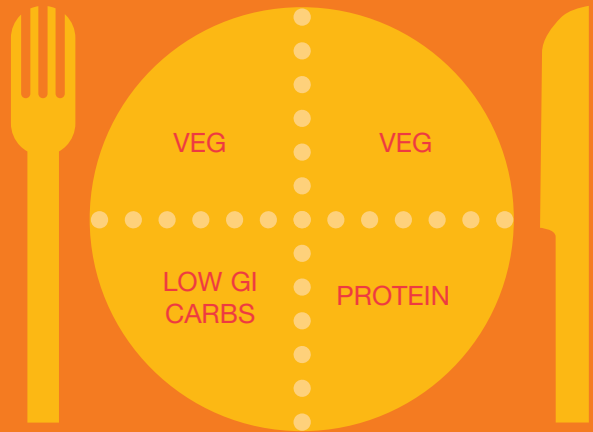
Lunch

- Add baked beans to your jacket potato
- Try a lentil-based soup
- Add variety with different breads, e.g., pita bread and bread made with a substantial amount of mixed grains and pumpernickel.

Evening meal

- Eat more pasta-based meals
- Include more beans and pulses

VARIETY IS KEY



A great tip for helping you to choose wisely and automatically have a balanced, slimming yet filling meal, is to imagine your plate is split into four quarters. Fill two with veg (such as crunchy broccoli and carrots), one with low GI carbs (such as aromatic sweet potatoes), and one with protein (such as char-grilled meat or fish).

Source: The GI Plan, Diabetes UK

rest of the population, i.e., a daily limit of 2 units for women and 3 units for men. A unit is about a half pint of ordinary strength beer, 125ml of wine, or 25 ml of hard liquor such as whisky.

Limiting alcohol consumption is important, says Diabetes UK. Alcohol increases the likelihood of incidents of hypoglycaemia (low blood glucose levels). However, as long as a person's diabetes is well-controlled, moderate amounts of alcohol in line with the daily guidelines can be drunk before, during or soon after a meal without affecting short-term blood glucose control.

The organisation warns against binge drinking, noting that

serious hypoglycaemia can occur with larger quantities of alcohol, particularly in people treated with insulin, and especially if too little carbohydrate is eaten. It suggests that if you have had alcohol to drink ensure you eat some carbohydrate before going to bed after a night in the pub. Useful snacks include toast, cereal and sandwiches. "Chips or pizza on the way home may be an easier, albeit healthier, option".

If you have diabetes you can eat and drink as everybody should do – not as the vast majority of population in fact does. One thing is certain, though: As a person with diabetes you should discuss your diet with your doctor or dietician regularly.