

Diabetes and Food: Myths and Facts

By Barbara Brody

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Eating well when you have [diabetes](#) can feel challenging, but the reason may not be what you think.

It's not just about temptation or [willpower](#). The real issue may be misinformation.

You can make smart choices without giving up all your favorite foods. You just need to know the truth behind these common myths.

1. Myth: People with diabetes must follow a special diabetes diet.

Truth: There's no such thing as a standard [diabetic diet](#). Some people with [diabetes](#) count carbs; others don't. If you're [overweight](#), one of your main goals should be to slim down, and there are endless ways to do it.

"Many popular [diet plans](#) -- such as [Weight Watchers](#) or [The Zone](#) -- can help you lose [weight](#). And the more you lose, the more you'll improve your [blood sugar levels](#)," says Michael Dansinger, MD, director of Tufts Medical Center's Lifestyle Coaching Program for Diabetes and [Weight Loss](#) and the [nutrition](#) doctor for NBC's "The [Biggest Loser](#)."

Not sure which one is right for you? Your doctor or diabetes educator can help you pick.

2. Myth: "Diabetes-friendly" and "sugar-free" foods are good for you.

Truth: That box of sugar-free cereal might not be any better than the regular cereal on the shelf next to it -- though the so-called diabetic version probably costs more.

Sugar-free foods often contain plenty of calories and even carbs, so always check nutrition labels closely. You'll also want to scan ingredients lists for sweeteners such as [sorbitol](#), mannitol, and xylitol, which may upset your [stomach](#), says Carolyn Brown, RD, a nutritionist at Foodtrainers in New York.

In general, it's best to limit all processed foods. Instead, fill up on a variety of [fruits and vegetables](#), lean beef, poultry, fish, and low-fat dairy products.

3. Myth: People with diabetes can't eat any sweets.

Truth: Yes, you can order dessert! Of course, it's not wise to end every meal with [chocolate](#) cake or indulge in ice cream daily. But it's perfectly fine to have a small serving of sweet food in an otherwise [healthy eating](#) plan, as long as you take into account the calories and carbs you ate that day.

"You'll go crazy if you limit yourself too much," Brown says. She urges her clients to satisfy their sweet [tooth](#) with fruit on a daily basis but says it's OK to splurge a little once a week, as long as you get right back on track.

Dansinger agrees. He notes that most weight-loss plans allow for some wiggle room. "You can be strict 90% of the time," he says. "All of my patients eat some sugar and some starch. Living life to the fullest has to include some treats."

4. Myth: People with diabetes shouldn't eat potatoes.

Truth: They're high in carbs, but you can still enjoy them in moderation. You can also eat other carb-rich foods, such as pasta, bread, and rice -- just don't go overboard.

"A serving of potatoes should be the size of your fist," Brown says. Since many spuds are large, plan to eat half at a time. Baked potatoes are healthy, but sweet potatoes are even better: "They have more [nutrients](#), including beta-carotene, which gives them their color," she says.

Eat the [skin](#), which is a great source of fiber. When it comes to grains, choose whole ones (such as brown rice or whole wheat pasta), and remember that they shouldn't take up more than one-quarter of your dinner plate.

5. Myth: Alcohol is off-limits.

Truth: Moderate drinking -- meaning no more than one drink a day for women and two for men -- is safe for most people with diabetes. But it's a good idea to talk it over with your doctor first.

Some [medications](#), like [insulin](#) or those that help increase [insulin](#) levels, can make you prone to [hypoglycemia](#) ([low blood sugar](#)). Alcohol may make that worse.

Also, your body digests alcohol differently from sugar, and the effects aren't always felt right away. "A drink you had at night could make your [blood sugar](#) drop the next morning," Brown says.

Don't drink on an empty stomach, and remember that calories count. As Brown says, "You're drinking your dessert."

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