

# Eating well for diabetes

'Fight Against Diabetes' recommends taking a sensible approach to diet and nutrition for people seeking to manage the disease.

**R**UDY, 39, is overweight and has a weakness for food. He habitually over-eats, knowing full well that he will have to suffer when the glucose starts to rise uncontrollably in his bloodstream.

Mei, 55, is just the opposite. She is unnecessarily restrictive with her diet. She has a long list of "forbidden" foods that she somehow believes are "bad" for her diabetes. For instance, she shuns rice dumplings, nasi kumiyit and everything that's made of glutinous rice.

Tila, 43, is a busy woman. Eating on the run, entertaining clients and having tons of paperwork to clear each day, she has little time (and patience) to watch her diet. She takes medication, hoping that it'll be enough to control her diabetes.

Like Rudy, Mei and Tila, many people with diabetes face difficulties and confusion when it comes to managing their diet. It would help a lot if they better understood how daily food intake affects the disease.

Glucose is converted from food. When glucose gets into the blood stream, it stimulates the body to produce a hormone, called insulin. This hormone opens the body's cells to receive the glucose that is needed as fuel. The blood glucose level reduces as more glucose is taken up by the cells.

With diabetes, however, it's a different story. The body either doesn't produce enough insulin or the cells themselves don't respond to the insulin properly. As a result, glucose can't easily get into the body's cells. So, it stays in the blood, where it accumulates to dangerous levels.

Meanwhile, the cells are starving for glucose, bringing on lethargy and fatigue. This is a reason why people who don't control their diabetes often complain of "feeling unwell".

High blood glucose levels also damage the large and small blood vessels. Prolonged poor control often leads to heart attacks, stroke, high blood pressure, kidney failure, blindness, nerve damage and poor wound healing that's responsible for foot ulcers and amputations.

## Smart eating tips

Clearly, people with diabetes need to manage their diet. Here are some tips to make it easier and more effective.

- Stay balanced. You need a balanced intake of energy and nutrients (such as carbohydrates, protein, fats, vitamins and minerals) like any other person. Since different foods provide different nutrients in different amounts, eat a variety of foods.
- Avoid overeating. Eating beyond your needs leads to

unhealthy body weight increase. This exacerbates diabetes in more ways than one. Besides, there is also the associated tendency to consume more fats than necessary, a factor that contributes to cardiovascular risk.

- Go for complex carbs. Carbohydrates are the body's primary source of glucose. Everyone (including people with diabetes) needs adequate amounts of carbohydrates, preferably the complex type. Sources of complex carbohydrates include unpolished rice, whole-meal bread, biscuits and breakfast cereals; and tubers. You'll also find complex carbohydrates in vegetables and fruits.

Compared with refined carbohydrate foods, the complex varieties tend to take longer to digest and won't cause a quick rise in blood glucose.

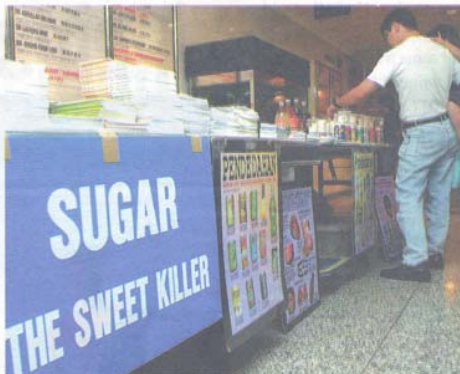
- Don't add sugar. Even people without diabetes are advised to cut down on their sugar intake, as it contains little or no other nutrients besides calories. Among people with diabetes, sugar needs to be treated with even greater caution. Sugar can cause a sudden surge in blood glucose.

It's best not to add sugar to your foods and drinks, or at least reduce the amount. If you are one of those who can't do without the taste of sweetness, you can substitute the sugar with a low-calorie sweetener; you'll get to enjoy the sweetness, with much less calories.

- Watch for hidden sugar. People with diabetes are advised to watch out for foods (eg cakes, baked goods and certain desserts) that use sugar as an ingredient to provide texture or body. While such treats are acceptable on occasion, some of them (eg konyaku jelly and corn cakes) can be made better by replacing the sugar with a sugar substitute.

● Eat smaller, more frequent meals. Your body can only handle so much glucose at a time. So, spread out your food intake through the day so that it is consistent and won't force your system to adjust to different blood glucose levels. Light, healthy snacks are acceptable, especially when you're hungry.

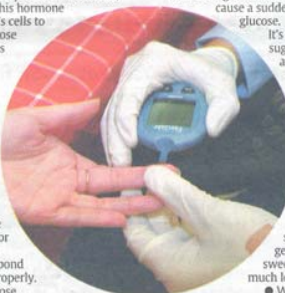
- Track and adjust. Using a glucose meter, you will be able to check on your blood glucose level. You will be able to respond to the reading by adjusting your food intake (along with physical activity and/or medication or insulin). If your reading happens to be high, you might pass on certain foods. If it is low, you may decide to eat before you go out, or pack along some foods to eat "on the road".



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While diabetes demands good dietary management, it doesn't mean that you cannot enjoy eating. It doesn't call for a rigid and tasteless diet (which will only discourage your efforts in the long run). Work with your doctor and dietician to develop a sensible diet plan. That way, you won't miss out on the good things in life.

'Fight Against Diabetes' is an educational programme by the National Diabetes Institute (NADI), supported by educational grants from EQUAL, Senesicare Bureau and OneTouch Centre by LifeScan (a Johnson & Johnson company). To receive a free educational magazine, call (03) 5621 1408.



Monitoring glucose level is essential for the diabetic to help achieve proper control of the disease.