

Food Exchanges for Diabetics

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If you're diabetic, one of your biggest challenges is to learn how to manage your diet to stabilize your blood glucose levels. For you, the importance of eating a heart-healthy diet is more than a recommendation--it can literally save your life. Food exchanging is a simple way to manage the quantity and quality of the [foods](#) you enjoy.

How Diet Can Affect Blood Glucose

Whether you're a type I, type II diabetic or at risk for contracting the disease, managing your blood glucose levels should be the most important part of your day. Unmanaged diabetes can lead to a host of complications that include kidney failure, coronary artery disease, blindness and even loss of limb. There are a number of approaches to eating a heart-healthy diet. Food exchanging is one of the most popular.

The food you eat directly affects your blood glucose levels--especially carbohydrates. After you eat foods containing carbohydrates, they are broken down in the small intestine. The smallest units, glucose molecules, circulate through the blood until they are delivered to the tissues of the body for energy production. People with unmanaged diabetes cannot process the glucose, so it remains in high concentrations in the blood. Those with well-managed diabetes process glucose normally.

Certain foods get broken down into glucose faster than others. They can raise your blood glucose levels. To manage blood glucose levels, it's important to learn how to eat a balanced diet consisting of foods that maintain glucose levels with the normal range.

How Food Exchanges Work

Food exchanging involves grouping all foods into eight groups: starches, fruits, milk and yogurt, sweets and desserts, nonstarchy vegetables, meat and meat substitutes, fats and free foods. Each of the groups contain a number of food choices, based on serving size, caloric content and percentage of fat. If you don't want to eat a particular food, you can exchange it for another.

The key to maintaining stable blood glucose levels is adhere to a meal plan. Meal plans consist of a certain number of servings of different food exchanges and eating with consistency. Consistency means eating the same quantities at the same time of day. Avoid binging or skipping meals. These can adversely affect your blood glucose levels.

A food exchange is one serving of food. Each food exchange is about the same number of calories, carbohydrates, fat and protein, so it should have the same effect on your blood glucose as other exchanges. For instance, 1/2 cup of cooked vegetables equals 1 cup of raw vegetables or salad greens. One cup of nonfat milk has the same value as 3/4 cup nonfat yogurt. And 1 ounce of turkey or chicken is equal to two egg whites. Free foods are foods or beverages with less than 20 calories or 5 grams of carbohydrates, such as diet sodas, mustard or garlic

Other Things to Consider

In addition to managing your food exchanges, try to eat high quality foods instead of snacks loaded with calories. Good choices are fruits, vegetables, whole grains and low-fat dairy products. You should also choose foods that are high in fiber, like whole grains, legumes and nuts. Limit your intake of saturated and trans fats and replace them with monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats. Good sources are olive and canola oil, nuts and seeds.

Diabetics eating food exchanges should also strive to lower their cholesterol intake. The American Heart Association recommends eating less than 300 mg of cholesterol per day. Try eating fish twice a week instead of higher fat foods like ground beef or hot dogs.

Resources

- [Diabetes Meal Plan Recipes](#)
- [Food Exchange Lists](#)