

What your dietitian wants you to know about diabetes

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There were 2.28 million cases of diabetes in South Africa in 2015 according to the [International Diabetes Foundation](#) and around 1.21 million people with undiagnosed diabetes. Considering these numbers it remains vitally important to continue educating South Africans about diabetes and to address the myths that are often associated with this lifestyle disease.



Nasreen Jaffer, Registered Dietitian and [ADSA](#) (Association for Dietetics in South Africa) spokesperson, has a special interest in diabetes. She debunks some of the myths surrounding diabetes and nutrition:

People with diabetes have to follow a special diet or have to eat special diabetic foods.

People with diabetes do not have to follow a 'special' diet. People with diabetes need to make the same healthy eating choices as everyone else. Healthy eating choices include vegetables and fruit, whole grains, fish, lean meats and poultry, dairy products, seeds, nuts, legumes and plant oils. Everyone needs to limit fatty red meats, processed meats, salt and foods high in salt, and foods and beverages with added sugar.

Are there any foods that should be avoided completely?

The answer, is 'no'. Moderation is key, the minute you've banned a certain food entirely, you're likely to start craving it intensely. Your health and weight are more affected by what you do daily than what you eat once or twice a week, so if you're in the mood for a piece of cake once in a while, buy a small one and share. If you deprive yourself of something you're craving, it's just a matter of time until you binge on it and sabotage your motivation. However, crisps, chocolates, and sweets are high in saturated and trans fat, while sugar-sweetened beverages like soft drinks, iced tea and energy drinks contain a large amount of sugar, so these have to be limited.

If I am diabetic, my diet is going to be more expensive.

It is not necessary to buy expensive foods marketed to diabetics. Healthy eating can be economical, and is often cheaper than buying unhealthy treats. Buying seasonal fresh fruit and vegetables is cheaper than buying fruit juices and sugar-sweetened beverages. If you replace sweets, chocolates, crisps, puddings and cakes with fruits, yoghurt and salads as your snacks and desserts, you'll find you will save money. Legumes, such as lentils and beans, are cheaper alternatives to red meat, while providing numerous health benefits.

Eating too much sugar causes diabetes.

Too much sugar does not necessarily cause diabetes, but because foods and drinks with added sugar are often energy-dense (high in kilojoules), consuming too much of these on a regular basis can lead to weight gain. This can put us at risk for type 2 diabetes.

Sugar-sweetened beverages seem to have the strongest link to type 2 diabetes. 'Sugar' doesn't only refer to the sugar added to tea and coffee, but also includes sugar and sweetened products added when cooking and at the table. Look out for hidden sugars in pre-prepared and processed foods, like some breakfast cereals, sweetened drinks, dairy products, sauces and sweet treats. People with diabetes should limit or avoid adding sugar as it can have a negative effect on blood sugar levels.

People with diabetes cannot eat carbohydrates.

No, this is not true. While all foods that contain carbohydrates will affect your blood sugar levels, people with diabetes can still eat carbohydrate foods. There are healthy types of carbohydrates that you do want to include in your eating plan, and the type or quality of carbohydrate foods is important.

Therefore, for optimal blood glucose control it is important to control the quantity, and distribute carbohydrate foods equally throughout the day. For example, choose wholegrain or high-fibre carbohydrate foods as they don't increase blood sugar as quickly as refined grains, and make sure that each meal is balanced, containing not only carbohydrate foods, but also protein or dairy, non-starchy vegetables or healthy fats.

People with diabetes should restrict their fruit intake.

Because fruit contains natural sugars, too much fruit can contribute to an increase in blood glucose levels. However, eating fruit also adds fibre, and essential vitamins and minerals to the diet, so while people with diabetes should not eat excessive amounts of fruit, fruit should not be completely eliminated. Portion control is important, and people with diabetes should choose whole fruit rather than fruit juice. It is recommended that you consult your dietitian to calculate the amount of fruit that you should include in your daily diet.

If one of my parents has diabetes, there is nothing I can do about it – I will develop diabetes eventually.

If you have a genetic predisposition to type 2 diabetes, you have all the reason you need to embrace a healthy lifestyle. While genetics may contribute 30-40% to the development of any condition, including diabetes, environmental and lifestyle factors may have a 60-70% impact. If you maintain a healthy body weight, stick to a healthy eating plan, avoid tobacco use and keep physically active regularly, you have a very good chance of not developing diabetes.

If I have diabetes, I can't exercise.

On the contrary, diabetes is a compelling reason to exercise regularly. The reason for this is that physical activity plays a very important role in lowering blood glucose levels. Exercise also predisposes your body cells to being more sensitive to insulin, and of course, it helps to achieve and maintain a healthy body weight. Aim for at least 150 minutes of moderate intensity activity a week, such as brisk walking, while doing some resistance or strength exercises at least twice a week. If you use insulin it is important to check your blood glucose levels before and after physical activity. If you get results below 6 mmol/l it is recommended that you lower your insulin dose or eat a healthy snack to prevent a hypoglycemic attack during or after exercise.

Early diagnosis of diabetes is vitally important. This year the theme of [World Diabetes Day \(14 November\)](#) is "[Eyes on Diabetes](#)", focusing on the screening for type 2 diabetes to ensure early diagnosis and treatment, which can in turn reduce the risk of serious complications. The sooner that elevated blood glucose levels can be treated and returned to normal, the better. If you are diagnosed with either pre-diabetes or diabetes, you need to start moving towards a healthier lifestyle that focuses on regular physical activity, good nutrition and weight loss if you are overweight or obese.

Everyone over the age of 45 years should be screened for diabetes every two to three years, or earlier if you are overweight and have other risk factors for diabetes (such as a family history, high blood pressure or previous diabetes during pregnancy). If you haven't yet been screened, visit a healthcare professional to find out if you are at risk.

Should you experience any of the following symptoms contact your doctor as soon as possible - sudden weight loss, hunger, blurred vision, tiredness, excessive thirst and frequent urination.

To find a registered dietitian in your area who can assist you with a diabetic-friendly lifestyle plan, visit www.adsa.org.za.

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