

# THE SWEET LIFE... WITHOUT SUGAR

How to lower your risk or mitigate  
the effects of diabetes

HEALTH SERIES | ISSUE 04



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# A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A DIABETIC

**The first thing that Joanie does when she wakes up to her alarm at 6am is check her blood glucose level. She does this by pricking her finger and drawing a drop of blood to test on her blood glucose meter. She then records the result in a logbook.**

Next, she munches on a banana before setting off for her morning walk. Upon returning, she checks her blood glucose level again before tucking into a healthy breakfast of rice congee or a bowl of mixed fruit. She then gets ready for her job as a receptionist.

Joanie may check her blood glucose level three or more times in the course of a day and night to ensure that she stays within the healthy range to manage her diabetes. On rare days, she may need to inject insulin to control her blood sugar level, but these days are becoming few and far between since she adopted a healthy diet and exercise routine.

Like Joanie, many people are impacted by diabetes on a daily basis. But having diabetes isn't the end of the world. By leading a healthy lifestyle through a nutritious diet plan and careful regulation of one's weight, the risk of developing diabetes can be reduced, and the negative effects of the condition can be managed, allowing you to live a healthy and fulfilling life.

## Diabetes

### • What is diabetes?

There are two major types of diabetes.

**Type 1** is categorised by a lack of insulin production and requires lifelong care and management through insulin injections and medication.

**Type 2** results from the body's ineffective use of insulin. Type 2 is more common and is a lifelong (chronic) condition. However, it is often preventable and can sometimes be 'reversed', meaning it can be managed without medication through ongoing dietary control and exercise.

### • What causes diabetes?

The body uses glucose obtained from food to stay energised throughout the day. When someone has diabetes, they have high blood glucose (blood sugar), either because their body does not produce enough insulin, or the body's cells do not respond effectively to insulin. If a person has a family history of diabetes, the risk of developing the condition is higher, and environmental factors such as being overweight, lack of activity and a poor diet also contribute to one's likelihood of developing diabetes.

### • Symptoms to look out for:

Some typical symptoms of diabetes include frequent urination, unquenchable thirst, weakness and fatigue, blurred vision, and tingling or numbness in limbs.



# DIABETES DETECTION

## Diagnosing diabetes

Do you suspect that you have diabetes because of your family's medical history? Do some of the diabetes symptoms resonate with you? Speak to your medical practitioner about a blood test to check your blood glucose levels.

If the test confirms that you're diabetic, or your body is pre-diabetic (where your blood sugar is not at normal levels, but is not yet at diabetic levels), there are simple, practical lifestyle changes you can make. These can help stop prevent the onset of Type 2 diabetes. Speak to your doctor about any medication required.

## Risk factors

Some people are more susceptible to developing diabetes due to certain risk factors, which include:

- Age: It is recommended that adults over the age of 45 go for diabetes screening every three years
- BMI: Adults with a BMI of 27.5 and above are considered to be at higher risk
- A family history of diabetes
- Overweight children who have other risk factors for diabetes (such as a family history)
- People who do not exercise regularly
- Women who had gestational diabetes during pregnancy, or who have had a baby weighing nine pounds or more at birth



## Blood Glucose Test

The most effective way to determine if you have diabetes is to get one or more blood glucose tests performed by a medical health professional. The different tests include the fasting blood glucose test, the haemoglobin A1C test, and the oral glucose tolerance test. They all measure the level of glucose present in the bloodstream, and the body's ability to regulate this glucose.

## What is Insulin?

Insulin plays an important role transferring glucose (the sugars found in food) from the blood, into cells for the body to use as energy. In the body, the pancreas produces hormones known as insulin and glucagon. Insulin is secreted by the pancreas when blood glucose levels are too high, and glucagon when blood glucose levels are too low. Someone is considered diabetic if the pancreas does not produce insulin or produces ineffective insulin.



# FACTS YOU NEED TO KNOW



**Being overweight makes it harder to control blood sugar levels, and the pancreas ends up working overtime producing insulin to keep blood sugar levels within a healthy range.**

But through weight management, increasing physical activity and adhering to a healthy diet, it is possible to manage diabetes or lower the chances of becoming diabetic.

## **Southeast Asia**

The incidence of diabetes in Asia is also on the rise. A major contributor is diet. Increasingly, people in Southeast Asia are adopting more unhealthy, sugar-laden diets. Also, some local dietary customs involving deep-fried or sweet foods are not making us healthier either.

Other reasons for the dramatic rise in the number of people developing

diabetes include access to fast or convenient foods, affluence, weight management and tobacco use. Whilst Type 1 diabetes cannot be prevented, the good news is that Type 2 can be prevented through a healthy lifestyle, including diet and regular exercises.

## **TIP**

*Skip! There's a reason boxers skip to get in shape before a big fight: skipping burns 340 calories in 30 minutes! To increase intensity, try increasing the number of skips within the same period of time!*

# BE KIND TO YOUR BODY

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**Over time, diabetes can cause other complications. Remaining vigilant with medical check-ups, adopting healthy lifestyle changes and self-monitoring will help to prevent further health worries down the track.**

## **Eyes: protect your eyes**

Diabetes can cause blindness as a result of damage to the small blood vessels in the retina over time. Schedule an annual eye exam with an eye specialist to look for signs of retinal damage, cataracts and glaucoma.

## **Heart: stub out the smokes**

Diabetes complications include heart diseases, stroke and circulation problems. Smoking actually adds to the risk of developing all of these things since it restricts blood flow throughout your body. By quitting smoking and engaging in regular cardiovascular exercise, the risk of developing diabetes-related cardiovascular disease drops. Quitting might not be easy, but it's well worth the effort.



## **Kidneys: be kind to your kidneys**

High blood sugar levels can overwork the kidneys, causing them to stop working in the long run. Therefore, keeping your blood glucose as close to your healthy goals as possible, reducing blood pressure, eating a healthy diet, reducing alcohol intake and scheduling regular visits to your doctor will all help to prevent kidney disease.

## **Teeth: say cheese**

Diabetics are prone to gum infections, so remember to brush at least twice a day and floss at least once a day to remove plaque and bacteria from the mouth. Visit your dentist at least twice a year for a

check-up and a thorough cleaning session.

## **Feet: protect your paws**

High blood glucose levels can cause reduced blood flow and nerve damage to the feet, resulting in sores and ulcers. Protect your precious feet by keeping them clean. After washing them, dry, moisturise and massage them, keeping a lookout for any open sores that could lead to infections.

## **TIP**

*Choose an activity that excites you; you are more likely to stick to an exercise that you enjoy rather than one that feels like a chore.*

# DIABETES & DIET



**Diet and diabetes go hand in hand. Understanding the nutritional make-up of what you consume is integral to the successful management of diabetes. A healthy diet can prevent and control diabetes by ensuring your blood glucose remains at a safe level.**

Watching your calorie intake also helps to control or reduce weight where necessary. A healthy weight helps to control blood sugar levels and reduce the risk of further complications – not to mention having you looking and feeling great.

## What makes a balanced diet?

A balanced diet consists of healthy carbohydrates and fibre-rich foods (fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes, low-fat dairy products), healthy fish rich in Omega-3 oil (salmon, mackerel, tuna, sardines), and good fats (avocado, almonds, walnuts).

Try reducing your intake of refined carbohydrates, such as white bread and sugary drinks; foods with saturated fats, such as sausages and deep fried foods; foods with a lot of sodium or trans-fats, such as processed snacks; and high-cholesterol foods, such as animal fats and organ meats. Healthy, low-sugar meals also help to maintain a healthy weight and avoid those 'sugar highs' and 'lows', which can affect mood throughout the day.

## TIP

*Maintaining healthy blood glucose levels is imperative for managing diabetes. Don't snack on chocolate bars when that level drops though – this will only add an unnecessary bulge to your waistline. Choose nutritious snacks. Five baby carrots, five baby tomatoes or two tablespoons of pumpkin or sesame seeds all contain less than five grams of carbohydrate. These will keep your blood glucose level in check for a longer time, make you feel full and give you the energy boost needed to enjoy your day.*



## Portion Control

It's not just what you eat; it's how much. A good rule is to divide a nine-inch plate into sections. Half the plate should consist of leafy, green vegetables (e.g. broccoli or bok choy) while the other half should be split between lean protein (e.g. fish or chicken) and low-GI carbohydrates (e.g. brown rice or sweet potato).

## Go Low

Carbohydrate-containing foods with a low GI are the best for maintaining healthy blood glucose levels. Try substituting a high GI snack with a low GI snack, like yoghurts and nuts, that's healthy and actually tastes great too.

## What is glycaemia and the glycaemic index?

Glycaemia refers to the presence of glucose in the blood. The glycaemic index (GI) measures how a carbohydrate-containing food raises blood glucose.

### TIP

*Did you know? A high consumption of white rice is associated with an increased risk of diabetes. Eating brown rice – a whole grain – actually protects against diabetes.*



### Five deceptively low-sugar local dishes

1. Stir fry chilli beef and broccoli with brown rice
2. Egg drop soup
3. Tofu with vegetables
4. Barbecued pork with mustard seeds and snow peas
5. Stir-fry prawn or scallops with vegetables





# DIABETES AND YOUR CHILD



**The pressure to hit the books and the attraction of TV, computer games and the internet are stronger for children than ever. Parents are often caught in a workaholic, fast-paced culture themselves.**

To ensure your household enjoys healthy food choices, simply implement some easy lifestyle changes for the entire family.

1. Exercise first, television last.
2. Stock the pantry with healthy snacks so kids aren't tempted by junk foods at home. Some low-GI school snacks:
  - Low-GI fruits like apples, pears, apricots and grapes
  - Low-fat yoghurt or cheese cubes
  - Two rice cakes with peanut butter
  - A small bowl of chicken noodle or vegetable soup
3. Implement a weekly meal plan that tracks nutritional intake for each meal, incorporating the plate portion method, carb-counting and low-GI dishes.

4. Make time for exercises that the entire family can enjoy or encourage your child to take part in an exercise that interests them. It's best if your child can do some exercise as soon as school is finished, so as not to be tempted by the television as soon as they get home. Social activities, such as family walks or team sports, are great for maintaining interest or enthusiasm.
5. Caregivers, such as nannies and grandparents, should be informed of your new healthy family routine, so that they can reinforce the schedule when you're not there. Help them build on your success by writing a weekly shopping plan for your new, low-GI recipes.



## Managing diabetes in children

To better manage diabetes in children, make sure to check (or teach them to check) their blood glucose levels regularly. Always have plenty of water and snacks on hand, and tell teachers, coaches and other caregivers about their condition. Equip your child with medical emergency information and contact numbers.

The success of diabetes management for your child is dependent upon maintaining easy access to medication, keeping a low incidence of stress, supplying family support through open communication, and providing appropriate involvement in the treatment process. Together with your children, prepare a logbook that records their blood glucose levels and teach them how to self-inject insulin should they require it.

### **TIP**

*Swap sodas and artificial fruit juices for a berry smoothie with low-fat milk, or a low-sugar home-made iced tea.*

# LIVE GREAT WITH TCM

**According to Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), diabetes is attributed to three major factors: improper diet (sweets, fatty or greasy foods, alcohol, and hot drinks such as hot coffee or tea), emotional disturbances (stress, anxiety, depression), and a constitutional yin deficiency (fatigue, weakness, lethargy, pale complexion).**

## TIP

*Luo han guo, a popular, antioxidant-rich Asian fruit, contains an extract that is 300 times sweeter than sugar. It has been used as a natural, low-calorie sweetener, and dessert recipe alternative for nearly a millennium. Try serving cooked Luo han guo for dessert with dried longan fruit and dried winter melon at the next family gathering.*

TCM divides diabetes into upper, middle and lower types, which are closely associated with the lungs, stomach and kidneys respectively. While TCM treatment is aligned to Western goals in terms of reducing symptoms and preventing complications, diagnosis and treatment may vary. TCM does not measure blood glucose levels, but treats symptoms of deficiency and disharmony through acupuncture, herbal medicine, meditation and a change of diet.



## TCM Herbs

TCM has been using herbal medicine to treat ailments and disease for more than 2,000 years.

One substance commonly used to manage diabetes by reducing blood glucose levels is Psidium guava, which is taken in the form of fresh leaves or as an infusion and drunk as a tea.

# FIVE STEPS TO ACHIEVING A HEALTHY LIFESTYLE

## 1 Set goals

Setting lifestyle and diabetes-related goals can help you to overcome any thoughts or beliefs that might hinder treatment and prevention. These include behavioural changes, such as weight loss through diet and exercise, going for regular medical check-ups, blood pressure control, and glucose monitoring, if required. If you are finding it difficult to stick to these goals, enlist friends and family members to help. That way, they can keep you on track, making it a whole lot easier to manage your condition.

Monitoring blood glucose levels will become second nature to people living with diabetes. But if you are pre-diabetic, or think you might be at risk, regular check-ups with the family doctor will help you keep track of your status and ensure you are healthy.

## 2 Remove sugar for a sweeter life

Following a low-GI meal plan that counts carbohydrates can help maintain a consistent blood glucose level throughout the day. Sugar highs and lows also have an effect on someone's mood, even from minute to minute. Anger, irritability, depression and generally feeling 'low' are all natural symptoms of low blood sugar levels.

Ditch processed sugars and stick to healthy carbohydrates – your body (and state of mind) will thank you for it.

## 3 Beat the bulge

Keeping weight within healthy guidelines will help prevent and manage diabetes. While exercise is essential for maintaining a healthy body weight, it also has a positive influence on diabetes by lowering blood sugar levels. To try to stop or slow the progress of diabetes, experts recommend up to 150 minutes of exercise per week and losing 5% to 10% of your body weight.

The adrenaline and stress of intense physical activity can also cause blood sugar levels to rise, so if you already have diabetes, close monitoring during exercise is required. If you're not used to exercising, start slow! You don't have to jump from zero to 150 minutes right away! Try some light to moderate exercises, such as walking or jogging, then work your way up from there. Always check your blood glucose levels before and after the workout.

## 4 Quit smoking

Not only does smoking cause severe health problems like cancer, it can be particularly damaging for diabetics. Smoking may actually double the chance of developing heart disease,

stroke and circulation problems. Smoke one less cigarette every day and work your way down from there. You can even rope in your friends and family to help you out! In quitting smoking, you don't have to be alone.

## 5 Get enough sleep

Do you get a good night's sleep? Studies have shown that people who sleep less are more likely to be overweight, thus raising their risk of developing diabetes. Also, people with diabetes who do not manage their blood glucose levels appropriately throughout the day are less likely to enjoy a smooth slumber.

As such, draw up a plan to give yourself at least seven hours of sleep every night! Also, stop taking caffeinated drinks within five hours of your sleeping time as they can easily affect your sleeping patterns.



## Handy Apps

Need help thinking of low-GI recipes, keeping track of your fitness goals or logging blood glucose levels? Technology is here to help! Check out the helpful apps and websites below.

## For Monitoring Diabetes

### Glooko Logbook

(Free, iPhone only)

Glooko™ Logbook app and Glooko MeterSync Cable download all of your meter readings directly into your iPhone® to automatically create a logbook in seconds.

### dLife Diabetes Companion

(Free, iPhone only)

dLife Diabetes Companion offers you access to the most essential tools you'll need to manage your diabetes on the go.

### Blue Loop

(Free, iPhone/android)

Blue Loop provides the ability to document, store and share diabetes information real-time: blood glucose, carbohydrates, medication, notes and more.

## For Weight Management And Dieting

### Calorie Counter & Diet Tracker by MyFitnessPal

(Free, iPhone, iPod touch and iPad)

Eat healthy or lose weight with this easy-to-use calorie counter. It has the largest database of foods of any app.

To help close those tired eyes and enjoy a restful night's sleep, make sure you schedule any exercise well before bedtime, reduce your caffeine intake late in the day and try relaxation techniques such as tai chi.



## Community Spirit

Working together to get fit is a lot more fun than doing it on your own. It also helps to meet people with health challenges similar to your own. Community groups and associations are often a great source of information on tips to get fit, eat healthy, access support networks, or just meet new people.

### Diabetes Society of Singapore

<http://www.diabetes.org.sg/>

### Malaysian Diabetes Association

<http://www.diabetes.org.my/index.php>

### Children with diabetes online community

<http://www.childrenwithdiabetes.com/>



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We're regularly growing the list of topics for you.

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