Diabetes Meal Planning: Getting Started

A healthy meal plan is important for managing your blood glucose.

A diabetes meal plan includes eating a variety of nutritious foods in moderate amounts and at regular mealtimes. This healthy meal plan is low in calories and high in healthy nutrients. Healthy food choices should include vegetables, fruits, lean protein and whole grains.

If you have diabetes or are at risk of getting diabetes, it is important to manage the calories and carbohydrates (CHO) in your meals to prevent a high blood glucose (sugar) level. Over time, high blood glucose levels can cause kidney, heart and nerve damage.

This brochure will explain what you need to know about:

- Creating a healthy diabetes meal plan
- Limiting some foods
- Choosing food portions
- Reading food labels

You should meet with a registered dietitian to make a meal plan that is right for you. The dietitian can help and teach you about how you can manage your blood glucose level and your weight with your eating plan.

Creating a healthy diabetes meal plan

Here are some basic guidelines that will help you manage your blood glucose.

Eat 3 meals a day:

- Plan to eat your meals at about the same time each day.
- Do not skip meals.
- Make sure you eat a variety of foods (fruits, vegetables, protein, whole grains, dairy).
- If your meals are more than 5 hours apart, have a small snack.

Reach and keep a healthy body weight:

- A healthy weight improves blood glucose levels.
- Count your calories and carbohydrates each day. Use a website or app like My Fitness Pal to do this.
- Stay physically active. Activity helps your body improve blood glucose levels.
- Try to get in 30 minutes of activity each day. This could be 10 minutes at 3 different times.

Manage your blood glucose:

- Take your medications as prescribed.
- Eat 3 meals a day and plan for snacks.
- Count your calories and carbohydrates daily.
- Check your blood glucose regularly.
- Include some form of exercise in your day.
- Follow your care team's guidelines.

Enjoy healthy carbohydrates

While all foods can affect your blood glucose, carbohydrates (CHOs) may have the biggest impact. A **consistent carbohydrate meal plan** can help manage your blood glucose. This means that you eat the same amount of CHOs at each meal.

Examples of healthy CHOs are:

- Starches (whole grain bread, brown rice, whole grain pasta)
- Beans (lentils, chickpeas)
- Starchy vegetables (winter squash, potatoes, corn, peas)
- Fruit (apples, grapes, oranges)
- Low-fat dairy products (low-fat milk; light, flavored yogurt)

Foods to limit

Over time, high blood glucose levels can damage your heart and blood vessels. Some foods can also increase your risk of heart disease and stroke. Avoid foods such as:

- Foods high in calories
- Foods high in saturated fats (high-fat meats, such as beef, hot dogs, deli meats, sausage, bacon)
- Foods with excess fat from animal products (butter, bacon, mayonnaise, cheese, creamy salad dressings, fried foods)
- Foods with trans fats (margarine, bakery foods, processed foods)
- Processed foods and added salt (sodium) in your meals
- Foods high in sugar:
  - Flavored yogurt
  - Ice cream
  - Juice
  - Dried fruit
  - Syrup-packed canned fruit
  - Fruit spread (jams, jellies)
  - Bakery goods (cookies, cake, pastry)
  - Candy
  - Crackers
  - Sugar-sweetened cereals

- Sweetened drinks (soft drinks, sweetened drink mixes, Kool-Aid®)
- Sweeteners (sugar, honey, molasses, syrup)

- Before choosing to drink alcohol, talk with your physician.

Food portion choices

Watch portion sizes:

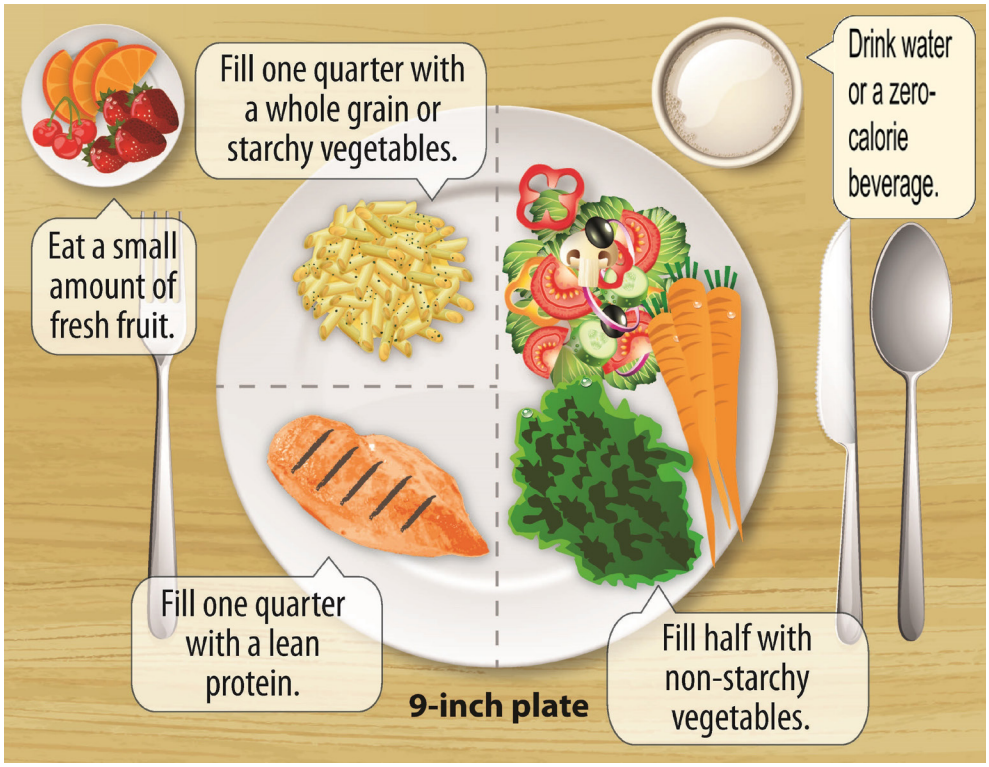
- Large portions of even healthy foods can cause high blood glucose.
- Make sure each of your meals has the same amount of CHOs.
- Follow the My Plate Planner at **myplate.gov**.

Use My Plate Planner

Create a healthy plate that will help to keep your blood glucose levels in an acceptable range. Choose foods from the Appendix Food Charts, and follow the plate method's 4 easy steps (Figure 1):

1. Draw a line down the middle of your plate and fill 1/2 of your plate with non-starchy vegetables.
2. Draw another line across the middle of the other 1/2 of your plate and fill 1/4 of your plate with a grain or starchy vegetable. Fill the last 1/4 of your plate with a lean protein.
3. A small piece of fruit or a serving of dairy is optional.
4. Finish your meal off with a glass of water or other zero-calorie drink option.

Figure 1: My Plate Planner



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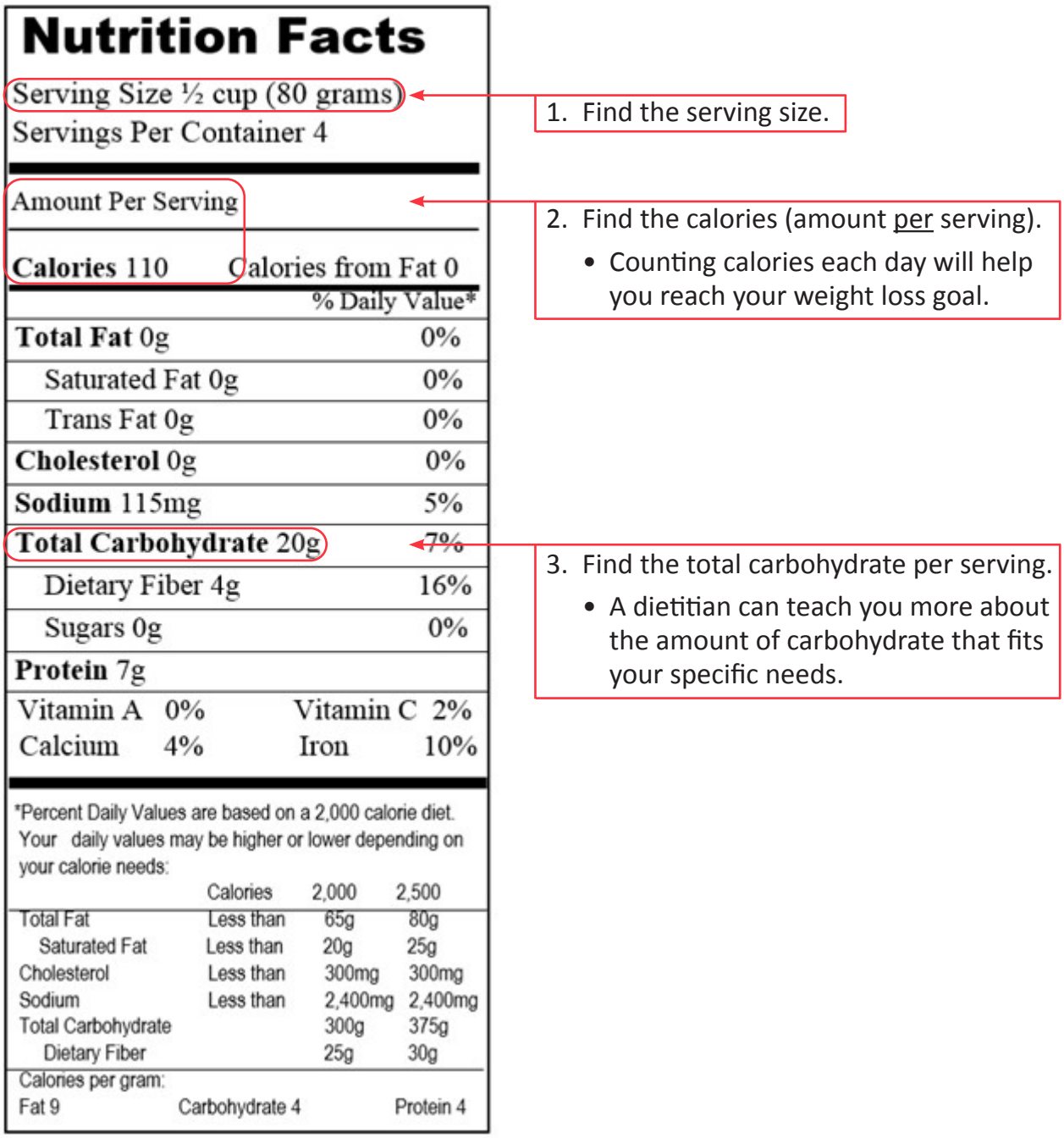
Reading food labels

Food labels have important information to help you manage your meal plan (Figure 2).

Since carbohydrates have a big impact on your blood glucose, it is important to keep track of how many carbohydrates you eat. Food labels use grams (g) to measure carbohydrates. 1 serving of carbohydrates is 15 grams. Your care team will talk to you about how many grams of carbohydrates per day are right for you.

Figure 2: Food Nutrition Label



Nutrition Facts

Serving Size ½ cup (80 grams)
Servings Per Container 4

Amount Per Serving

Calories 110 Calories from Fat 0

	% Daily Value*
Total Fat 0g	0%
Saturated Fat 0g	0%
Trans Fat 0g	0%
Cholesterol 0g	0%
Sodium 115mg	5%
Total Carbohydrate 20g	7%
Dietary Fiber 4g	16%
Sugars 0g	0%
Protein 7g	

Vitamin A 0% Vitamin C 2%
Calcium 4% Iron 10%

*Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet. Your daily values may be higher or lower depending on your calorie needs:

	Calories	2,000	2,500
Total Fat	Less than	65g	80g
Saturated Fat	Less than	20g	25g
Cholesterol	Less than	300mg	300mg
Sodium	Less than	2,400mg	2,400mg
Total Carbohydrate		300g	375g
Dietary Fiber		25g	30g

Calories per gram:
Fat 9 Carbohydrate 4 Protein 4

1. Find the serving size.

2. Find the calories (amount per serving).
   - Counting calories each day will help you reach your weight loss goal.

3. Find the total carbohydrate per serving.
   - A dietitian can teach you more about the amount of carbohydrate that fits your specific needs.

A healthy menu example:

Breakfast	Lunch	Dinner	Snack
• 1/2 cup oatmeal • 1 cup berries • 1 cup skim milk • 1 tbsp peanut butter	• 2 slices whole grain bread • 3 ounces sliced turkey • 1 tbsp mustard • 1 cup carrot sticks • 1 small apple	• 3 to 4 ounces baked fish • 2/3 cup brown rice • 1 cup cooked broccoli • 1 cup salad • 1 tbsp salad dressing • 1 cup raspberries	• 1/3 cup hummus • 1 cup cucumbers

This menu example shows 3 to 4 servings of carbohydrates at each meal.

These are general guidelines. To create a meal plan for your specific needs, meet with an outpatient registered dietitian by calling the Northwestern Center for Lifestyle Medication at 312.695.2300 (TTY: 711) or the Center for Integrative Medication at 312.926.DOCS (3627). They can help you make an appointment for a personalized consultation.

For more information about diabetes:

- Call the American Diabetes Association (ADA) at 800.DIABETES (800.342.2383)
- Go to **diabetesfoodhub.org**

For more information about Northwestern Medicine, please visit our website at nm.org.
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Carbohydrates (CHO)

Foods that increase your blood glucose:

Starch *(1 serving = 15 g of CHO)*	**Other Starches and Sweets** *(1 serving = 15 g of CHO)*
• 1 slice bread • 6-inch tortilla • 1/2 English muffin, hamburger bun or hot dog bun • 1 small pita • 1/4 bagel (1 ounce) • 1 waffle or pancake (4-inch round, 1/4 inch thick) • 3/4 cup unsweetened, dry cereal • 1/2 cup sweetened or bran cereal • 1/2 cup cooked cereal (oatmeal, grits, Kashi®, bulgur) • 1/3 cup cooked pasta, rice, couscous, quinoa • 4 to 6 crackers (2-inch) • 3/4 ounces (15 to 20) pretzels, snack chips • 3 cups light popcorn • 3 tbsp flour (dry)	• 1/2 cup casserole or lasagna, macaroni and cheese, pasta with meat sauce • 1 cup broth-based soup • 1/2 cup cream-based soup or chili • 1 tbsp sugar, syrup, jam, jelly or honey • 2 tbsp light syrup • 2-inch square cake or brownie, unfrosted • 1 to 2 small cookies • 1/2 cup ice cream, gelatin or frozen yogurt • 1/4 cup pudding, sherbet or sorbet • 1/2 cup sugar-free pudding
Fruit *(1 serving = 15 g of CHO)*	**Milk** *(1 serving = 12 g of CHO)*
• 1 small fresh fruit (tennis ball size) • 1/2 large fruit • 1/2 cup unsweetened applesauce • 1/2 cup canned fruit in own juice or water • 1/2 banana (4-inch length) • 3/4 cup blueberries or blackberries • 1 1/4 cup strawberries • 1/3 cantaloupe or honeydew (1 cup cut) • 1 wedge watermelon (1 inch thick) • 17 medium grapes • 1/2 small papaya • 1/2 grapefruit (large) • 2 tbsp raisins or “craisins” • 1/4 cup dried fruit pieces • 3 dried plums, dates or figs • 1/2 cup unsweetened juice • 1/3 cup prune, grape or cranberry juice	• 1 cup fat-free, skim or reduced-fat milk • 1 cup unsweetened soy milk • 1 cup buttermilk • 1 cup Lactaid™ milk • 1 cup kefir • 6 ounces flavored plain yogurt

Not all food products are the same. Be sure to read the food labels of the foods you choose to get the correct serving size and nutritional information for that product.

Other Food Groups

These foods are very low in CHO and have little effect on blood glucose.

Non-starchy Vegetables *(1 serving = 5 g of CHO)*	**Proteins**	**Fats**
• 1/2 cup cooked vegetables • 1 cup raw vegetables • 1/2 cup tomato or vegetable juice Any vegetables *except* corn, peas, potatoes Non-starchy vegetables include onions, asparagus, green beans, broccoli, tomatoes, peppers, jicama, kale, carrots, cucumber, lettuce, spinach, cabbage, cauliflower, eggplant, celery	• 1 ounce lean meat, fish, poultry or shellfish • 1/4 cup low-fat cottage cheese • 1 ounce low-fat cheese • 1 egg or 1/4 cup egg substitute • 1/4 cup nuts • 1 tbsp peanut butter • 1/2 cup tofu	• 1 tsp margarine, butter or oil • 1 tbsp reduced-fat margarine, butter, mayo or cream cheese • 2 tbsp reduced-fat sour cream, salad dressing, or half and half • 1/4 cup avocado • 1 tbsp nuts (6 to 7 nuts) • 10 olives • 1 tbsp sesame or sunflower seeds

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