

Diabetes

What is it?

Except in unusual circumstances our bodies burn sugar as fuel, and there always needs to be sugar in the blood stream to power us along. However, the body is very sensitive as to the concentration of sugar, and a hormone called insulin controls this. When we eat a meal, blood sugar rises and this triggers the release of insulin. This in turn stimulates the uptake of sugar into cells, as well as the storage of the excess sugar as glycogen. It also inhibits the breakdown of fat stores into sugar. As the level of blood sugar falls as a result of these measures, insulin levels fall, and if it gets too low then the glycogen is changed back into sugar, blood sugar levels rise, and the cycle starts again.

Diabetes occurs when the pancreas doesn't make enough insulin, or when the insulin doesn't work effectively. This means that the body cannot control blood sugar levels correctly.

What are the possible symptoms?

Early symptoms include thirst, fatigue and weight loss, possibly with blurred vision and itching. Long term, diabetes can cause severe circulatory problems resulting in ulcers and dermatitis on the legs and feet with amputation becoming necessary in advanced cases. Eye problems are common because of restricted circulation to the retina, as is impotence in men. Also, because insulin inhibits the breakdown of stored fats, obesity can result.

If blood sugar levels fall too low, diabetics can enter a coma which can be life threatening, and for this reason many carry around a chocolate bar or glucose tablets, which can rapidly raise blood sugar levels in an emergency.

What are the risk factors for diabetes?

Some types of diabetes are genetic and will be present from birth. Most cases arise later in life however, either temporarily during pregnancy or as a result of simple old age, obesity or any disease that damages the pancreas. Eating sweets is not in itself considered enough to trigger diabetes. Having said that, a diet with wildly fluctuating blood sugar levels caused by many refined sugar snacks and soft drinks can exhaust the pancreas, making diabetes more likely.

Diabetes is on the rise in the western world, and is becoming common at increasingly earlier ages, alongside the rise in childhood and adult obesity.

Check out the diabetes website on www.diabetes.org.uk.

PLANET ORGANIC

Can diabetes be treated?

Diabetes cannot be cured but it can be managed. The aim is to eliminate symptoms and prevent complications. This is done by switching to a healthy diet and rarely by the regular injection of insulin.

What foods are suitable for diabetics?

The aim for dietary management of diabetes is to prevent wild swings in blood sugar levels that would result from foods high in refined sugar. It used to be the case that diabetics were advised to eat special diabetic foods, which were sugar free. However, frequently the sugar was replaced with unhealthy artificial sweeteners, and the foods themselves were nutritionally empty. The concept of specific foods for diabetics has become outdated, and while some are still available they are expensive, unpalatable, not organic and certainly not healthy.

The advice nowadays is to eat a healthy wholefood diet consisting of wholegrains, fresh vegetables and avoiding refined sugars; the type of wholefood diet that is recommended for everyone, and that has always been promoted by Planet Organic.

What are good food choices for diabetics?

- Fruit spreads sweetened with fruit juice instead of sugar
- Sauces sweetened with fruit juice or agave syrup
- Rice syrup, malt syrup or other grain-based sweeteners
- Low fat products
- High fibre products such as whole meal bread, pasta and brown rice
- Products high in soluble fibre such as dried fruits
- Dark rather than milk chocolates
- Eating sugary foods such as raisins with protein foods like nuts, which slows down digestion of the sugar
- Eating small regular meals

I am diabetic, can I eat...?

We frequently get asked in the shop if a particular food is suitable for diabetics. Unfortunately this is often an impossible question to answer, as it depends much more on the diabetic than on the food. Someone who in general manages their diet very well can often get away with small quantities of chocolate or biscuits that other diabetics could not. All we can say is that there are some foods that are better suited for diabetics than others, and in general any foods with a high refined sugar content should be avoided.