

# Tips for Pacific peoples with diabetes living in NZ



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“Pacific peoples” is a term used to describe peoples indigenous to one of the many small nation states in the Pacific.

It comprises those from a diverse range of cultures and languages, each with its own traditional food and customs. Though there is similarity among these groups, it is also important to recognise the diversity when providing nutrition education and dietary management.

In this article we focus on emigrants to New Zealand from one of the Pacific Islands or those born in this country with parents or grandparents who have come from the islands.

Food is central to all Pacific cultures. For many Pacific peoples the value of food is context-specific – from a resource of simple sustenance through to a symbolic observation of respect, love, and hospitality and the honouring of guests.

The traditional role and value of food in Pacific society is a stark contrast to the way food is viewed in managing diabetes where it is primarily considered a source of nutrients.

Pacific peoples tend to see food as something to be enjoyed rather than to be controlled or rationed for health reasons.

The complex dietary pattern of the Pacific community in New Zealand is determined by interplay of many factors, including socio-demographic considerations such as income, occupation (often involving long working hours), living arrangements, obligation and commitments to family, community and church.

A holistic approach to health therefore is vital for Pacific people with diabetes.

It is essential when providing a meal plan for someone with diabetes that the recommended diet should be based on the person’s current food intake. Hence, an assessment of current eating patterns is crucial.

Common aspects which need to be highlighted include the amount of food eaten, an understanding of carbohydrate foods, meal patterns and timing of meals, feasting and Sunday meals, and takeaways.

## Amount of food eaten

The types and amounts of food consumed are important in achieving good blood glucose control and also weight reduction.

Eating too much is a common practice among Pacific people. Eating too much of any food, even healthy foods, can result in weight gain and poor diabetes control.

Portion control and reducing the amount of food eaten at each meal is important. For example, at breakfast a reduction from six, seven or eight slices of bread down to three or four can have a big impact on diabetes management. At dinner, reducing the amount of meat eaten and increasing the amount of vegetables provides another suitable solution (see box on recommendations).

## Carbohydrate intake

Carbohydrate is the major source of energy for Pacific peoples, and more is now being consumed in processed foods such as cereals and white flour products. Traditional starchy vegetables (banana, taro, yams, cassava, kumara) are very much part of Pacific meals.

In the Pacific region carbohydrate food is mainly referred to as starch and sugar. Diabetes is interpreted as *suka* (sweet blood) in many Polynesian languages.

Traditional diabetes education involved telling people to avoid all sugars and as a result most people know to stop adding table sugar to food and hot drinks. But they do not realise that sugary foods such as baked products, biscuits, sweet desserts, soft drinks and fruit juices are also sugar-rich foods.

The total amount of carbohydrate in the diet, regardless of whether it is sugar or starch, determines blood sugar levels after meals. Some people find the glycaemic index too technical to try to understand and use.

Reducing the overall amount of food eaten has the biggest impact on blood glucose control.

## Meal pattern and meal times

Timing of meals is important for people with diabetes, especially those taking medication. In general, they should eat three main meals each day at regular intervals.

Meal times are very important, but the majority of Pacific Island people do not have a set meal time, and tend to eat when they feel hungry. Typically someone not working will eat his or her first meal (breakfast) between 9am–12pm, miss lunch and then eat dinner between 4–6pm, followed by another meal (supper) at around 8–11pm. This cycle of eating results in over-eating and leads to weight gain.



Eating smaller meals every four to five hours is recommended. Snacks are not encouraged as they are not necessary and can contribute to weight gain.

Having a glass of water before each meal helps prevent overeating by creating a feeling of fullness.

**Special occasion meals**

Food offered on special occasions (birthdays, weddings, funerals and church activities) is an important part of celebrating life for many Pacific people. Feasts are a reminder of home and are an important venue for family and social exchange. Feasts are also an important way to preserve traditions and help develop the community’s unique identity.

The Sunday meal is something special for a Pacific family, as Sunday is a day for rest and church activities, and for families to share food. A typical Sunday meal will include two or three meat dishes, with traditional starchy food (such as taro, banana, yams, kumara, or cassava) cooked in coconut cream.

The amount and types of food consumed on Sundays can impact on diabetes management. Cutting down on the total amount of food eaten and offering plenty of non-starchy vegetables can help.

Add an extra hour of activity on Monday to burn off excess calories eaten the day before.

**Takeaways**

Takeaways are usually eaten at least once a week, and sometimes up to three or four times each week. As these are high in fat they add extra calories. Reduce takeaways to once every two weeks or once a month.

Water is the best fluid to drink, and a clear alternative to sweet fizzy drinks.

**Home blood glucose monitoring**

A lot of Pacific people with diabetes do not like testing their own blood sugar at home. Understanding the importance of testing their blood glucose to manage their diabetes is useful in helping motivation.

Good fasting blood glucose before breakfast can be interpreted as good control and, unfortunately, can result in the person eating whatever they want to, often in large amounts for the rest of the day.

This usually results in poor HbA1c which, in many cases, does not reflect the daily and weekly fluctuations in blood glucose control. A random blood sugar test should always be part of the regime.

It is important that people with diabetes of Pacific Island heritage have access to supportive health professional teams which can provide education and ongoing support.

Reducing the amount of food eaten has the biggest impact on blood glucose control. ●

Meals	Typical meals	Recommended ways to make these healthier
<b>Breakfast</b>	1 bowl porridge 1 teaspoon sugar Milk (standard) Toast – 1–2 slices white or wholemeal bread	Reduce food eaten by having one choice – either porridge or toast, but not both
	Cereals <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 4–6 Weetbix</li> <li>• 1–2 teaspoons sugar</li> <li>• 2–4 slices white toast</li> </ul>	2-3 Weetbix, but avoid having both Weetbix and toast Use artificial sweeteners instead of sugar Eat wheatmeal or wholegrain, not white bread or toast
	6-10 biscuit breakfast crackers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Margarine or butter</li> </ul>	3–4 biscuit crackers Thin spread of margarine, no butter
	Rice – Boiled rice (Tongans) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sugar</li> <li>• Milk or coconut cream</li> </ul> Cocoa Rice (Samoan) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sugar</li> <li>• Cocoa Samoa</li> <li>• Milk or coconut cream</li> </ul>	Use low-fat milk Avoid coconut cream, or dilute in water or low-fat milk Avoid Cocoa Samoa, or limit to once a week, not 3–4 times a week
	Leftovers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2 servings of meat dish (chicken, beef or sausage)</li> <li>• 2–3 medium-size cooked banana or taro</li> </ul>	Save this for lunch or dinner
<b>Cooked lunch and dinner</b>	Cooked starchy vegetables 2–4 medium size banana, taro, kumara, cassava 2–4 potatoes 1 bowl rice  Meat – 1 bowl of beef, chicken or mince <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hot pot or soup</li> <li>• Chop chey</li> <li>• Vegetables added</li> </ul>	If you have cooked food for lunch then have a light meal at dinner time Cut down the amount of carbohydrate (starchy vegetables) – limit to 1 or 2 a day.