

## Popular myths about diabetes

**Myth:** Eating too much sugar gives you diabetes

**Fact:** Diabetes is caused by a complex combination of factors. Type 2 diabetes is connected to genetics and lifestyle. Eating too much sugar (or foods with sugar) can cause weight gain, and weight gain can increase a person's risk for developing the disease.

**Myth:** People with diabetes should eat special diabetic foods

**Fact:** A healthy meal plan for people with diabetes is generally the same as a healthy diet for anyone – low in saturated and trans fat, moderate in salt and sugar, with meals based on lean protein, non-starchy vegetables, whole grains, healthy fats and fruit. Diabetic and “dietetic” foods generally offer no special benefit. Most of them still raise blood glucose levels, are usually more expensive and can also have a laxative effect if they contain sugar alcohols.

**Myth:** You can catch diabetes from someone else

**Fact:** No. Although we don't know exactly why some people develop diabetes, we know diabetes is not contagious. It can't be caught like a cold or flu. There seems to be some genetic link in diabetes, particularly type 2 diabetes. Lifestyle factors also play a part.

**Myth:** If you have diabetes, you should only eat small amounts of starchy foods, such as bread, potatoes and pasta

**Fact:** Starchy foods can be part of a healthy meal plan, but portion size is key. Whole grain breads, cereals, pasta, rice and starchy vegetables like potatoes, yams, peas and corn can be included in your meals and snacks. In addition to these starchy foods, fruits, beans, milk, yoghurt, and sweets are also sources of carbohydrate that you need to count in your meal plan.

Wondering how much carbohydrate you can have? A place to start is about 45-60 grams of carbohydrate per meal. However, you may need more or less carbohydrate at meals depending on how you manage your diabetes. You and your health care team can figure out the right amount for you. Once you know how much carb to eat at a meal, choose your food and the portion size to match.

**Myth:** People with diabetes can't eat sweets, chocolate or sugar

**Fact:** If eaten as part of a healthy meal plan, or combined with exercise, sweets and desserts can be eaten by people with diabetes. They are no more “off limits” to people with diabetes than they are to people without diabetes. The key is to have a very small portion and only occasionally so you focus your meal on more healthful foods.

**Myth:** People with diabetes are more likely to get colds and other illnesses

**Fact:** You are no more likely to get sick if you have diabetes. However, people with diabetes are advised to get flu shots as any illness can make diabetes more difficult to control. People with diabetes who do get the flu are more likely to go on to develop serious complications.

**Myth:** If you have type 2 diabetes and you need to start using insulin, it means you're not taking of your diabetes properly

**Fact:** For most people, type 2 diabetes is a progressive disease. When diagnosed, many people with type 2 can maintain a healthy blood glucose level with oral medications. Over time, the body produces less of its own insulin, and oral medications may not be enough to keep blood glucose levels normal. Using insulin to get blood glucose levels to a healthy level is not a bad thing.

**Myth:** Artificial sweeteners are better for you than sugar

**Fact:** Many "sugar-free" foods have sugar alcohols. They may not raise sugar levels as high, but there are side effects that can affect your stomach and intestinal system. Studies have shown artificial sweeteners and non-nutrient sweeteners increase insulin resistance and hunger. People trying to save calories often eat more because of the artificial sweeteners. It is best to take them out of your diet. If you're going to eat sugar, get it from natural sweeteners or fruit, but be mindful of your intake.

**Myth:** Children can outgrow diabetes

**Fact:** Children don't grow out of diabetes. In type 1, the cells of the pancreas that produce insulin are destroyed. Once these cells are destroyed, they won't make insulin again.

Some children with type 2 diabetes may be able to lower their blood sugar levels, and not need medication if they have a healthy lifestyle of nutritious food and regular physical activity.

**Myth:** You can cure type 2 diabetes

**Fact:** There are some factors connected to developing type 2 diabetes you cannot change – such as ethnicity and family history. However, maintaining a healthy BMI (body mass index), and a lifestyle of nutritious food and regular physical activity may help you manage your blood sugar levels so that you no longer need medication. This is not a cure. It is better managing it. Some diabetologists refer to this as being in remission.

It is important to note, if you do not maintain a healthy lifestyle, and gain weight, your blood sugar levels could rise and diabetes could escalate again.

**Myth:** Fruit is a healthy food so it is okay to eat as much of it as you wish

**Fact:** Fruit is a healthy food. It contains fibre, vitamins and minerals. Because fruits contain carbohydrates, they need to be included in your meal plan. Talk to your dietitian about the frequency and types of fruits you should eat.

Diabetes New Zealand is a leading national organisation and registered charity. Our aim is to support all people affected by diabetes to live well through: Providing information and support to help people take charge of their health • Acting as an advocate and representing all people with, or at risk of developing, diabetes • Raising awareness of diabetes, especially around lifestyle factors that can help prevent or delay type 2 and help manage and control type 1 and type 2.