

The good news: You can stick with a normal diet as long as you keep your intake moderate. As the ADA notes, even sweets or chocolate “are no more off limits to people with diabetes than they are to people without diabetes.”

By Tom Gray

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Source: Susan Burke March, Constance Brown-Riggs, Kelly O'Connor (all are registered dietitians and certified diabetes educators); American Diabetes Association



Resources

American Diabetes Association

Survey results: www.diabetes.org/for-media/2009/america-earns-failing-adm-sd-2009.html

“Myths of Diabetes”:

www.diabetes.org/diabetes-basics/diabetes-myths

The National Diabetes Education Program

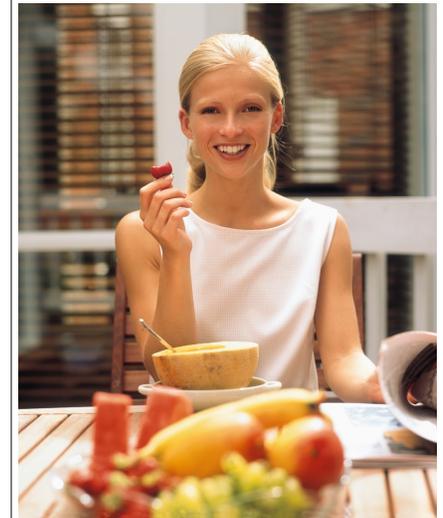
www.ndep.nih.gov/am-i-at-risk/DiabetesRiskFactors.aspx

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Common Misconceptions About Diabetes: Learn the Facts, Take Action



- Diabetes kills more Americans than AIDS and breast cancer combined.
- You can be thin and have diabetes, too.
- Eating sugar does not cause diabetes, and there is no special “diabetes diet.”

DIABETES MELLITUS

What you don't know can hurt you, especially with a disease that you may have for years without any obvious symptoms. Diabetes mellitus, especially in its most prevalent form (type 2), is just such a disease.



An estimated 23.8 million Americans have diabetes. About 30 percent of these cases, or 7 million, have not been diagnosed. "If you get a diagnosis of diabetes, it's probable that you've been living with it for 6 years," says Susan Burke March, a registered dietician and certified diabetes educator. The complications of the disease are "insidious," she says, "like having a house with termites."

One way to get a jump on this quiet but very serious disease is to know the facts about it—and act on them.

Diabetes is a serious disease

An October 2009 survey conducted by Harris Interactive for the American Diabetes Association (ADA) revealed significant and potentially dangerous misconceptions and gaps in knowledge.

For instance, the myth persists that diabetes is not that serious a disease. Only 42 percent of the 2,081 American adults surveyed ranked diabetes accurately against AIDS and breast cancer as a cause of death in the United States. In fact, it kills more people than the other 2 combined, primarily through heart disease and stroke.

Weight is just one of several risk factors

About 3 in 5 respondents believed, erroneously, that you will eventually develop type 2 diabetes if you are obese or overweight. The fact is that overweight is a major risk factor, but it does not necessarily lead to the disease. Most overweight people never develop type 2 diabetes. Many people of healthy weight do develop it.

Weight is only one of several major risk factors that could predispose a person to type 2 diabetes. (Type 1 diabetes, which typically starts in childhood, is primarily inherited.)



The risk of type 2 diabetes rises with:

- age
- high blood pressure
- lack of exercise
- family history (Your risk goes up if you had a parent or sibling with diabetes.)
- ethnicity (All else being equal, you are more at risk if you're African-American, Latino or Asian than if you're white.)
- a personal history of gestational diabetes, which can occur in pregnancy

There are plenty of good reasons to maintain a healthy weight and stay active. Just don't assume that you're out of danger if you're fit and thin.

No special diet, but watch portion size

Can eating too much sugar give you diabetes? It cannot, but most of the respondents in the ADA survey believed this myth. Only 32 percent knew it was false. Other food myths persist as well, especially the notion that there is a special, restricted diet that people with the disease must follow.

"Fifteen years ago we had something called a 'diabetic diet,'" says certified diabetes educator Constance Brown-Riggs. Patients were told they had to change their lifestyle and possibly give up foods they loved. The thinking now, says Brown-Riggs, is that a normal healthy diet works for people with diabetes, as long as they hold down their portion size. "What we know now is that it is really more the total carbohydrate content at each meal that has the impact."

A too-hearty meal, even if it's heavy on healthy fare such as fruits and vegetables, can stress the body's ability to control blood sugar levels. One alternative, suggested by Brown-Riggs, is to have 6 small meals a day rather than 3, and to keep the overall quantity the same. March suggests saving some food that you would normally eat with one meal—a piece of fruit with lunch, for example—and eat it a couple of hours later. Another dietician and certified diabetes educator, Kelly O'Connor, recommends "3 small to moderate meals and 2 or 3 snacks in between."