The Flexible Eating Guide for Diabetes Management and Risk Reduction

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With contributions by:

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Toby Amidor is an award-winning registered dietitian and nutrition media and communication specialist who believes that healthy and wholesome food can also be appetizing and delicious. She serves as an expert on the *Forbes Health Advisory Board, FoodNetwork.com,* and *Today's Dietitian Magazine.* Amidor is also a *Wall Street Journal* best-selling author, with eleven cookbooks, including *Health Shots, Up Your Veggies, The Create-Your Plate Diabetes Cookbook, Create-Your-Plate Diabetes Meal Prep Cookbook,* and *The Greek Yogurt Kitchen.*

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A nationally recognized bilingual and bicultural registered dietitian, author and certified diabetes educator, Marina Chaparro's food philosophy is about adding, not restricting. She is founder of *Nutrichicos,* a bilingual pediatric space where she helps parents raise healthy & positive eaters with a cultural twist. Her personal experience with Type 1 diabetes inspired a lifelong passion for nutrition, including authoring the American Diabetes Association's *Pregnancy & Diabetes: A Real-Life Guide for Women with Type 1, Type 2, and Gestational Diabetes*. As a former Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics spokesperson, Chaparro's advice is regularly featured in media outlets such as *Diabetes Forecast, Univision,* and *Huffington Post*.

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A registered dietitian and Certified Diabetes Care and Education Specialist, Jasmine Westbrooks-Figaro believes in a realistic approach to improving nutritional habits for better quality of life. She is he cofounder and Executive Director of *EatWell Exchange, Inc.* a 501c3 non-profit organization that provides nutrition education, resources, and tools to low socioeconomic families and communities with a focus on cultural foods. In addition to her experience in community nutrition, Westbrooks-Figaro is a media dietitian, accomplished keynote speaker and is featured in media outlets such as *Real Simple, Essence, Self Magazine, Epicurious, ABC News California,* and many more.

Nutrition and Diabetes Risk Reduction

The prevalence of Type 2 diabetes (T2D) has reached epidemic proportions in the U.S., with more than 38 million adults (11.6% of the population) currently living with the condition.[1] Diabetes incidence continues to rise annually, with U.S. adults facing a 40% chance of developing T2D over the course of their lifetime.[2] Notably, there are significant racial and ethnic disparities in T2D prevalence and risk, with Black and Hispanic individuals disproportionately shouldering the disease burden.[3,4]

Targeted lifestyle and prevention strategies, early detection and effective management can help improve health outcomes for people living with or at risk for developing T2D. In particular, nutrition education is a cornerstone for T2D management and risk reduction.[5] Balanced eating patterns emphasizing whole grains, fruits and vegetables, lean proteins, and low fat dairy can provide fiber, phytonutrients, and other bioactive compounds that may help improve glycemic control, insulin sensitivity, lipid profiles, and inflammatory biomarkers associated with T2D pathogenesis.[6]

This guidebook is designed to enhance your patient conversations about the impact of nutrition on risk reduction and management of T2D. It offers practical resources, including flexible eating tips, patient education strategies and simple recipes that can help motivate behavior change and promote lifelong health and wellbeing.

Yogurt and Diabetes Risk Reduction

Yogurt is known to be a nutrient-dense food with many benefits. In 2024, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration announced a new Qualified Health Claim stating that "Eating yogurt regularly, at least 2 cups (3 servings) per week, may reduce the risk of Type 2 diabetes according to limited scientific evidence." The FDA reviewed the available research on yogurt and type 2 diabetes, drawing conclusions from 28 cohort studies with over 800,000 individuals, and found that the evidence suggests including yogurt in the typical American diet may have a benefit to public health.

Patient Education Strategies

Share the Facts About Diabetes

Help your patients understand the facts about diabetes. Combat these common myths with tips from registered dietitians Toby Amidor, Marina Chaparro, and Jasmine Westbrooks-Figaro.

MYTH: **"Having prediabetes or diabetes means I won't be able to enjoy the foods I love, and I need to eat only sugar-free options."**

FACT: Living with prediabetes or diabetes doesn't have to mean your patients must give up favorite foods or follow a strict diet. Instead, work with them to develop an individualized approach and find ways they can enjoy their favorite foods while managing blood glucose. Successful diabetes management requires education about different food choices, including how they can affect blood sugar.

MYTH: **"If I skip meals, I will be able to manage my blood glucose levels better."**

FACT: Blood glucose regulation is essential to successfully managing T2D. It's important for patients to understand how meal timing affects their overall health. Educate patients on the importance of eating consistently, aiming for balanced meals or snacks every 4 to 6 hours. Explain how to build a balanced meal or snack, including the role of carbohydrates, protein, and fats. Work together to create a routine that includes flexible meal and snack options to help provide sustained energy and prevent blood sugar spikes and dips.

MYTH: **"People living with diabetes cannot enjoy yogurt."**

FACT: Due to its naturally occurring carbohydrates, it is often a common misconception that people living with diabetes should avoid yogurt when in fact, it can be part of a diabetes-friendly eating pattern. Yogurt is a nutrient-dense food often containing high-quality protein, calcium, zinc, B-vitamins and live, active cultures, some of which may be probiotics. You can also help guide your patients to higher protein options, like Greek yogurt. Educate them on how having balanced meals and snacks with a mix of protein, fat and complex carbohydrates can help slow the absorption of glucose into the bloodstream, and how combining yogurt with higher fiber toppings like seeds, unsalted nuts, or high fiber fruits like raspberries or blackberries can create a satisfying meal or snack.

Encourage a Flexible Eating Approach for Diabetes Management

A flexitarian eating pattern contains both plant-based foods (such as fruits, vegetables, legumes, grains, nuts and seeds) and animal-based products in a balanced approach, and can be appropriate for people living with or at risk for developing T2D. This flexible way of eating centers around balance and adaptability, supporting health and wellbeing while still enjoying favorite foods. Encourage your patients to follow these principles to get started:

- **Add** more plants – fruits, vegetables, legumes, nuts, seeds, and whole grains
- **Swap** proteins – opt for plant-based options more often, or mix plant-based proteins with meat and other animal products
- **Emphasize** flexibility – make food choices based on feeling good, hunger and fullness cues, personal or cultural preferences, and maximizing nutrition and enjoyment

How To: Communicate Flexitarian Eating

While not all patients may be familiar with the term "flexitarian," many will likely embrace the core principles and appreciate the eating pattern's flexibility. Here is how you can help them connect the dots.

- Explain what the term "flexitarian" means and help each patient see how the foods they eat can be part of this flexible eating pattern. Plant-based foods from a variety of cultures, including beans, rice, and greens all fit, as do moderate amounts of animal-based foods.
- Emphasize that flexitarian eating is about finding sustainable solutions that work for each individual long-term. Rigid materials break easily, while flexible ones can last a lifetime—the same goes for nutrition.

Patient Education Strategies (cont.)

Practice Patient-Centered Care

Patient-centered care (PCC) and communication is defined as "providing care that is respectful of and responsive of individual patient preferences, needs, and values and ensuring that patient values guide all clinical decisions." PCC is reported to improve patient health and satisfaction, outcomes, and may play an important role in providing culturally sensitive care.[7] Follow these strategies to provide PCC in your practice.

- **Quiet your inner problem-solver.**

  Put aside any implicit biases and judgement, including your own ideas of what your patient should do or needs to do. Focus the conversation on what your patient is interested in doing, changing, or working on by asking questions like, "What foods do you and your household like to eat?" or "What are your favorite foods and how often do you eat them?" Show empathy, avoid interrupting, and give your patient the opportunity to express themselves. Invite them to share their experiences around food, culture, and lifestyle.

- **Act as a co-pilot, not a captain.**

  Rather than telling your patient what they should do, help them set goals they feel motivated and capable of achieving. Encourage collaboration and empower by asking your patient to suggest possible solutions: "What ideas do you have to address this challenge?" Understand their concerns and preferences by asking open-ended questions and follow-ups. Consider sharing relevant experiences from others or your own life, if appropriate.

- **Simplify your support by focusing on one specific issue at a time.**

  This approach allows for more effective problem-solving and creates a positive rapport between the practitioner and patient. Ask, "What was your biggest challenge in attaining your nutrition goals this past month?" Or "If I could help you with one thing today, what would it be?" During education, use acronyms as a teaching tool to help reduce confusion and empower patients to take control of their health.

Elevating Deliciousness through Flexible Eating

Celebrate flexible eating and elevate the deliciousness of nutrient-dense, plant-based foods. Help your patients manage diabetes by sharing these simple swaps and recipe ideas.

Simple Swaps for Flexible Eating

- Add vegetables to your favorite dishes. Incorporate diced mushrooms into hamburgers or meatballs, add grated carrots to whole grain muffins, mix zucchini noodles with whole wheat spaghetti, or include salsa as a topping or dip. The goal is to enhance the nutritional value of meals with more plants.
- Use nonfat plain yogurt (regular or Greek both work) instead of sour cream as a topper for tacos and baked potatoes, a marinade for proteins, or a base for salad dressings and dips.
- Swap sugar-sweetened beverages with fruit-infused water. Boost flavor by adding fresh fruits or herbs in combinations like cucumber with pineapple, or mint with strawberry to create a refreshing drink without added sugar. For a bubbly twist, try sparkling or seltzer water.
- Shift your mindset to maximize health and enjoyment. Release the guilt and choose foods you love that nourish your mind and body.

Registered Dietitian-Approved Recipes

Strawberry Banana Yogurt Bowl

This recipe provides complete protein and complex carbohydrates, a great choice for a balanced and delicious snack.

Serves: 1

Ingredients

- One 5.3 oz container Light + Fit Strawberry Greek nonfat yogurt
- Half a medium banana, sliced
- 4 strawberries, sliced
- Sprinkle of ground cinnamon
- 2 teaspoons chopped unsalted nuts

Directions

1. Layer ingredients in a bowl or glass and enjoy!

Tzatziki Sauce

Tzatziki is a creamy, tangy, and versatile condiment. It cools spicy dishes, adds flavor to lean proteins, enhances wraps and salads, and pairs well with any vegetable tray or charcuterie board.

Serves: 6

Ingredients

- 1.5 cups Oikos Plain Greek Yogurt
- 2 Tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 1 Tablespoon white vinegar
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1 Tablespoon fresh dill and basil, chopped
- 1 large cucumber, chopped
- 2 large garlic cloves, finely minced

Directions

1. In a medium-sized bowl, whisk yogurt, olive oil, vinegar, salt, and herbs until smooth.
2. Gently fold garlic and cucumber to incorporate.
3. Serve as a topping for grilled chicken or fish, or as a dip for crispy plantain or vegetable chips.

Paletas de Mango with Greek Yogurt

A refreshingly sweet treat with only four ingredients and zero added sugar.

Serves: 4-5

Ingredients

- 2 ripe mangos or 4 cups of frozen mango
- 2/3 cup (6 oz) Oikos Plain Greek Yogurt
- 2 Tablespoons chia seeds or flax seeds
- 1/4 cup orange juice
- Chile lime seasoning (optional)

Directions

1. If using fresh, peel and roughly chop the mangos.
2. Add mango to the blender with yogurt, seeds, and orange juice.
3. Cover and blend on high until mixture is smooth.
4. Pour mixture into 4-5 popsicle molds.
5. Freeze for 3-4 hours, or until set.
6. Cover with chile lime seasoning and enjoy.

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