

family healthy eating is crucial for a person style with diabetes—as well as the whole family

Like many youngest siblings, I often felt left out as a child. I was always “monkey in the middle” or “it” in a game of tag—that’s if I got to play at all. I ran home crying to mom on several occasions, but today my sister and I can laugh about the past, knowing no real harm had been done.

But for people with diabetes, being left out when it comes to family mealtimes can be not only ostracizing, but also detrimental to their health.

on the side of good health

People with diabetes have special dietary needs. Proper management of the condition requires them to keep their blood sugar levels under control by eating a healthy diet. But unless the entire family partakes in the good-for-you lifestyle, it can wear on the person with diabetes, making him or her feel left out and discouraged to keep up the healthy ways.

by shelly flannery

To ensure that doesn't happen, the family—the entire family—should adopt diabetes-friendly eating habits. How? First, educate yourself about the disease. “Each family member should learn about diabetes and what the diabetic member needs to do to take care of himself,” says Richard R. Rubin, Ph.D., CDE, past president of healthcare and education at the American Diabetes Association. “There's a potential to strengthen your relationship if you stay on the same side through this.”

Being on the side of the diabetic family member also benefits each person, as a diabetes-friendly diet is healthy for everyone. Here are ways to make over your family's eating habits.



DIET CHANGE

Choose lean cuts of meat and nonfat dairy products.

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT: While meat and dairy products don't have as much of an effect on blood sugar as other foods, they can be high in fat and calories. And being overweight raises blood sugar.

HOW TO INVOLVE THE FAMILY: If you're used to eating red meat and drinking whole milk, slowly switch to healthier options. When making hamburgers, mix ground turkey in with the ground beef. Then gradually use less beef. With milk, switch to 2 percent, then 1 percent and finally fat-free.



DIET CHANGE

Choose whole-grain products over refined carbohydrates.

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT: Whole grains have less of an effect on blood sugar than refined carbohydrates. Diabetes occurs when the body is unable to produce enough or properly use insulin, which converts sugars, starches and other foods into usable energy. So, keeping blood sugar levels under control is essential.

In addition, whole grains contain nutrients such as vitamins B and E, iron and fiber. They also contain antioxidants that have been found to reduce the risk of heart disease, cancer and diabetes.

HOW TO INVOLVE THE FAMILY: When people think of whole grains, they usually think of whole-grain bread. That's a good start, but it can become boring if it's the only whole-grain product you eat. The key is to eat a variety of whole grains, says Tara Gidus, R.D., a spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association. She suggests making a game of it and trying one new whole-grain product each week, such as oatmeal, couscous or wild rice.



DIET CHANGE

Incorporate more fruits and vegetables into each meal.

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT: Besides being rich in essential vitamins, fruits and vegetables are low in fat and calories. But the best part is they're filling. “Eating fruits and vegetables can help reduce portions of other foods that aren't as healthy,” Gidus says.

HOW TO INVOLVE THE FAMILY: One of the best ways to get kids on board with healthy eating is to involve them in the meal planning and food preparation. Take them grocery shopping and ask them to pick out produce that represents each color of the rainbow. Then, incorporate as many colors as possible into each meal at home. For added festivity, use brightly colored plates.



DIET CHANGE

Learn portion control.


WHY IT'S IMPORTANT: “Even if you're eating all the right foods,” Gidus says, “you can still have problems if you eat too much of them.”

HOW TO INVOLVE THE FAMILY: First of all, banish all notions of a clean-plate club. Never force children to keep eating if they're not hungry. Practice measuring out appropriate portions, and soon you'll be able to

eyeball them. Download the brochure “How Much Are You Eating?” by visiting mypyramid.gov and typing “how much” into the search box. It tells you how many servings from each food group adults and children should eat a day and offers tips on calculating portions.

on their own

If you’re the parent of a diabetic child, you can monitor what he or she eats at home. But not every meal can be eaten at home. Here are tips for ensuring your child is eating healthfully all day long, from Christine Gerbstadt, M.D., R.D., CDE, a spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association:

- * Teach your child how important eating healthfully is for him or her versus other people, especially other kids.
- * Emphasize moderation, not deprivation. Don’t make any foods off-limits. Instead, encourage occasional small treats.
- * Ask your child’s teachers and friends’ parents for their help in monitoring what your child eats.
- * Investigate the school lunch program. If healthy options are not offered, pack your child’s lunches. 



free recipes for the whole family

Don’t let a lack of creativity hamper your ability to cook healthy meals for your family. The American Diabetes Association offers free recipes every day that may help. Go to

diabetes.org

and click
“Recipe of
the Day.”

go 

support system

Supporting a diabetic family member at the dinner table is important, but support should extend to other facets of life as well. Educating yourself about the disease is the first step. Here are other tips for supporting a loved one with diabetes, from Richard Rubin, Ph.D.,

CDE, past president of healthcare and education at the American Diabetes Association:

- UNDERSTAND YOUR LOVED ONE’S DIABETES.** Just as no two people are alike, no two cases of diabetes are alike. Learn the nuances of your loved one’s condition.
- OPEN THE LINES OF COMMUNICATION.** Ask questions like “What is the hardest thing about living with diabetes?” and “What do I do that makes it easier or harder?”
- OFFER HELP.** Listen to your loved one’s answers and respond accordingly, whether it be by picking up medication and supplies they need at the drugstore or simply offering encouragement.