

Eating well for one

Eating healthily for one requires a little planning and motivation, writes **Pauline Dunne**

Eating well can be a challenge for many of us. Factor in busy lives, dietary considerations and for some lack of skills or interest in cooking and the challenge is increased further. While many of us have lots of nutrition knowledge – we can know what to do, but may not have the motivation to put the knowledge into practice.

Eating healthily and ensuring a well-balanced diet can have a hugely positive impact on our health – consuming more fresh unprocessed foods and fewer convenience foods can help achieve better blood glucose control, improve our cholesterol levels and also improve blood pressure.

What's great to know is that we don't have to be stuck to the kitchen cooker to realise some of these changes. A few straightforward swaps and sensible planning can make a huge difference.

Firstly, don't even think about skipping breakfast. 'Break fast' – literally means to break the overnight fast. Our bodies work hard overnight to recharge and repair, so our first meal of the day is a vital refuel. Glucose is our brain fuel so concentration can be lacking if we don't replenish stocks first thing.

Breakfast doesn't need to lack variety – porridge, Weetabix or bran flakes are a great way to start the day being both high in fibre and filling. Add some fruit and a portion of dairy (low fat milk or natural yoghurt) and you're well on your way to a good start. Fruit salad and

0% Greek yoghurt, overnight oats, toast with one teaspoon of nut butter and

a banana, or an egg with soldiers are also great ways to begin the day.

Eating regularly means to have a breakfast, a midday meal and an evening meal with no lengthy gaps in between. It doesn't really matter whether you have your main meal – usually we think of this as a 'hot dinner' – in the middle of the day or in the evening, just be mindful of your portion sizes. If you tend to lose motivation to cook or prepare a healthy meal in the evening, then why not aim to have your main meal in the middle of the day, minimising evening efforts?

Both meals usually have a palm sized piece of protein (lean meat, chicken, turkey or fish), about one third of a plate of starchy carbohydrate (bread, rice, potato, pasta or noodles) depending on your energy requirements and one-third to one-half of a plate of vegetables. Plain and simple cooking is just fine – while we are surrounded by recipe books and tv programmes about food, we do not have to become chefs in order to eat well. Simple healthy balanced eating is 100% nutritious.

Restaurant food, ready meals and take aways are commonly high in salt and fat, and low in fibre and other essential nutrients. So while they can be convenient and a quick fix, they shouldn't form the bulk of our diets. If you eat out a lot, here are a few points to consider:

- How large are the portion sizes? Can you order ½ portions? Or maybe they will box up ½ to take away – chill and reheat appropriately to have for dinner the next day
- How about gravy/sauce on the side?
- Baked or boiled potatoes would be a healthier choice than mash or chips
- Ask for extra plain vegetables or salad
- Choose soup without cream as the

healthy choice. If having a bowl of soup alongside a main meal, consider how much (if any) bread you need to eat

- If having sandwiches – be mindful of paninis, ciabatta and baguette rolls which can be the equivalent of more than four slices of bread. An ordinary sandwich with sliced pan would be a better option
- Many sandwich options come with crisps or chips as standard – these are fine occasionally but if they feature on your plate regularly, anticipate it and ask for some undressed salad instead
- Many cafes and restaurants offer a sandwich and soup combo where a cup of soup is placed alongside the sandwich. A great way to help fill you up instead of the crisps!

Snack attack

Many of us over rely on snacks for fear of going hungry, because we miss meals or lack mealtime routine, or haven't had a meal and are making up for it. Snacking regularly is no problem, once we are mindful of quantities. A snack is only meant to bridge a gap until the next meal. It shouldn't be considered a meal replacement. Overdoing it with snacks, particularly those high in carbohydrate can lead to out of target blood glucose levels and weight gain too.

Ease up on the amount of cakes, crisps and biscuits (yes, even the plain ones) that come into the house. They will add up quickly causing weight gain and high blood glucose levels. Snacking on high fat high sugar foods can also disrupt our appetite leading to irregular meals – and further snacking – it can become a vicious circle.

Try to prepare healthy snacks in bulk which can be stored or refrigerated for a few days at a time. If possible, don't



NUTRITION

bring biscuits or cakes into the house so that you can't end up grabbing them as a quick fix. Fruit salad, diet yoghurts, cherry tomatoes, chopped vegetables like carrot, pepper or celery, or small tubs of salad mix (lettuce, tomato, cucumber) are quick to put together and a healthy option for when hunger strikes.

Fast meals

A fast meal doesn't have to be take away or fast food. It is all about having a well-stocked fridge and cupboard, and a plan. Choose one carbohydrate source and one protein source from the suggestions below and add as many vegetables as you like, hey presto a balanced meal. Remember – portion sizes of carbohydrates are individual and will vary depending on your age, gender and activity levels.

More information on portion sizes can be found at www.healthyireland.ie

Carbohydrate sources – bread, potato, sweet potato, couscous, noodles, rice. If choosing pre-cooked rice or noodles, just be mindful of salt content

Protein sources – eggs, pulses – beans, peas, lentils, lean meat, oily fish – mackerel, salmon, sardines, fish fillets

Vegetables – freshly frozen vegetables such as peas, French beans, broccoli, cauliflower, onions, sliced peppers, carrots, mixed vegetables, stir fry mix, salad leaves, spinach, cooked beetroot.

Some favourite speedy ideas from the *Diabetes Ireland* team:

- Stir fry with vegetables and meat/fish/prawns
- Omelette with cheese and tomatoes, serve with a green salad
- Jacket potato with baked beans, tuna/sweetcorn mix or leftover chilli Potatoes cook quickly in the microwave
- Steamed vegetables/potato/chicken or salmon – layer up a steamer so that only one cooker ring is needed, or use a layered microwave steamer.

Rethink 'convenience'. By having the right options to hand, meal preparation too can be convenient, and will be a great addition to your long-term health.

- Write a shopping list, and plan your meals/lunches/snacks for the week

ahead. It won't take long and will set you up for having healthy choices to hand. See our shopping guide at:

www.diabetes.ie

- Buy in bulk, using your shopping list. Set aside some time each week to the grocery shop, or use about online shopping, it is quick and will often be delivered to your door
- Become friends with your freezer – freeze bread in portions for one, stock up on frozen vegetables and have a supply of protein sources such as fish fillets/prawns/quorn (vegetarian) mince
- Bulk cooking such as making soup, a stew, casserole, chilli, or bolognaise sauce and freezing in individual portions means a hot meal is never too far away
- Cook extra carbs – cooking rice or pasta or potatoes? Double up and use the leftovers for lunch or dinner the next day
- Consider a 'slow cooker' – it does as it says, cooks slowly over several hours meaning a hot meal could be ready to greet you when you arrive home in the evening
- Share cooking with friends or family – many people enjoy sharing meal-times. Can you join others for meal and alternate whose turn is it to cook? Not only is it social but it can be a good way to learn how to cook new dishes
- Instead of seeing bulk preparation of chopping or cooking a chore, use the time to your advantage. Listen to music, a radio show or save your favourite podcast for this time.

Take time to enjoy your meals. For further ideas on supermarket shopping and recipes, and more detailed information on eating well with diabetes or pre-diabetes in mind, see www.diabetes.ie

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