Diabetes and Sweets: Finding Balance

by AFRA WILLMORE

Diabetes and Sweets: Managing Sugar Intake

We have barely packed away the Christmas decorations when the shops start packing the shelves with another mountain of sweet treats, this time in readiness for the Christian festival of Easter.

No matter what your beliefs, it's easy to be tempted by hot cross buns, chocolate bunnies and Easter eggs at this time of year. One year I ate at least one packet of hot cross buns a week until they finally disappeared from the shelves. It's a good job I decided this was a bad idea for my waistline as now they seem to stock them in my grocery store all year round!

The year I was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes I told my family not to buy me any chocolate eggs, bunnies, chicks or in fact any other barnyard animal made of chocolate, and hid chocolate eggs for the children without popping any into my own mouth – organizing an Easter egg hunt is really no fun on a chocolate-free diet.

But it turns out those measures weren't necessary. You can enjoy chocolate and all the other seasonal treats if you are diabetic – in moderation of course!

The Danger of 'Diabetic' Treats

Small amounts of chocolate and other sweets can be eaten as part of a diabetic's diet; there is no need to buy specialist products. If you do, and gorge on them thinking you are OK because they are "diabetic-friendly," you might find the laxative effect of the sugar substitute leaves you feeling quite poorly.

Additionally, special "diabetic" chocolate is often higher in fat and calories than "real" chocolate, and they generally costs more money.

So, bearing in mind Easter only comes round once a year, allow yourself a treat if you want to and choose a real chocolate egg. Avoid the small ones filled with gloopy cream and opt for a traditional hollow one. They might look huge, but there's more hole than chocolate, unless you choose one as big as your head! Check the packaging for carb information and plan it in as you would any food.

There is good news for people like me who love dark chocolate. Apparently this might be more suitable for diabetics as it contains fewer carbs and so raises blood sugar (glucose) less.

Just watch out for any sweets inside the egg or packaging, and ration yourself to a small piece each day – or a couple of tiny solid eggs or a small piece of Easter cake instead. Spread your treats across the whole of the Easter holiday rather than eat a whole egg all on one day.

For the Children

The same advice is true if you have diabetic children. Of course, allow them a small amount of chocolate or buy them an egg if you want to, but maybe ask relatives and friends to buy them a non-food gift instead of candy.

If you are going to an Easter egg hunt with them perhaps let them hunt for eggs, but ask them to give their stash to their friends or to swap their haul for a cash reward or another gift.

Or you could organize an alternative, like a jigsaw hunt. Hide envelopes containing a few pieces of the jigsaw with clues leading to the next envelope. End the hunt with a jigsaw-building session. The children get some exercise and the jigsaw should keep them occupied for a while too.

Keeping Balanced

Whatever sweet treat you decide on, remember it's always best to eat it at the end of a healthy balanced meal. If you want to have a small portion of a starchy, high-carbohydrate sweet, substitute some of the carbohydrate content in your meal before. Luckily traditional Easter meals tend to be quite diabetic friendly – we always have roast lamb or turkey with lots of steamed vegetables and some potatoes for the carb element, roasted in a small amount of olive oil with a sprig of rosemary.

If you are going out to a friend or family member's celebration (at Easter or at any time) offer to take a dish or two of food, so you know there will be something there you can eat without compromising your health.

When the chocolate cravings strike, distract yourself by tie-dying or painting some eggs, or going on a long walk with the family to see if you can spot some real Easter bunnies.

If you know you have no will power when it comes to sweet treats – I present my hot cross bun addiction as an example – don't buy them and ask your loved ones who normally buy you food gifts to treat you to flowers, or a book, or some toiletries (chocolate scented?) instead.

Or you could ask them to donate the money they might have spent on sweets to your local diabetic charity or another favourite cause, which will help your blood glucose levels, your heart and kidneys and your waistline, *and* give you a lovely warm fuzzy feeling!