What Diabetics Need to Know About Reading Food Labels

by COLLEEN KELLY

Understanding Food Labels

As a diabetes educator, one of the most common questions I am asked when I see a patient who is newly diagnosed with diabetes is, "What can I eat?"

There are a lot of misconceptions about what a person with type 2 diabetes should and shouldn't eat. I'm hoping I can help to clear up some of those misconceptions today.

Misconception #1: You Need to Count Sugar Grams

False – to an extent.

I love when a new patient comes in and says that they have been cutting back their sugar grams since they were diagnosed with type 2 diabetes. It tells me something – they have already been watching food labels!

However, they are only looking at *part of the picture.*

Carbohydrates are listed with the sugar grams underneath. This means that the sugar grams are a component of the carbohydrates. For this reason, we actually like to have people with diabetes count their *carbohydrates*not their *sugar*.

Whoa! I bet I just rocked your world right there!

However, if you have been watching sugar grams, you may be doing a pretty good job already because foods that are high in sugar are going to be high in carbohydrates. There are some foods though, that are higher in carbohydrates that may not be high in added sugar – like fruit.

Instead… count your carbs. I also see people who take their carb-counting advice from their friends and family members. Everyone has different dietary needs. A woman who is 165lbs will have different carbohydrate needs than a man who is 315lbs, so I would recommend making an appointment with a registered dietitian who has experience with diabetes who can help to make a diet plan specific to *your* needs.

Misconception #2: You Can Eat All the Fruit You Want!

False!

Fruit is excellent food – it is high in vitamins and minerals. It is a great sweet treat and is undoubtedly healthier than a candy bar. However, it is a carbohydrate and as we now know, carbohydrates affect blood sugar.

This stands to reason – eating several pieces of fruit for a meal or a snack will increase the blood sugar to a

higher than the desired number.

Instead… I recommend having a single serving of fruit for a snack or with a meal. Individual needs may vary, of course, but this is a good rule of thumb.

If this seems like a small snack, try adding foods that do not have carbs with the serving of fruit, such as a cheese stick, a handful of nuts, a smear of peanut butter or almond butter, or beef jerky. Perhaps have a snack that isn't fruit at all, such as carrot sticks and hummus or cheese and crackers.

Misconception #3: Juice Is Healthy

Remember that label we discussed? Take a look at your juice label. Then look at the size of the serving. Then look at your juice glass. How many servings do you drink at a time? Now, how many grams of carbohydrate is in each glass of juice you are drinking? Better yet – how many glasses of juice are you drinking each day?

For that matter – are you also consuming regular soda, milk, and other caloric beverages? Chances are, these beverages also contain carbohydrates. If you're consuming these types of beverages throughout the day instead of water, you may be consuming just as many carbohydrates through your beverages as you are through your foods.

Instead… Consume water as your main beverage. Water is non-caloric and contains no carbohydrates, meaning that you can save those carbs for FOOD!

But – what if you don't like water? What can you drink instead?

Here are some great ideas for jazzing up water:

- **Add frozen fruit to a cup of water or a water bottle.** When the fruit melts, it will add flavor to the water.
- **Purchase a water diffuser.** These allow you to place fruit in a container of sorts, and the fruit flavor diffuses into the water without the fruit itself actually being in the water (for those of you who may not like the pulp of the fruit in the water).
- **Pick up individual flavorings.** Examples include Crystal Light and Mio. These flavorings are portable and I've known people to carry them in their purses or wallets so that they always have the ability to have a flavored water.
- **Try a sparkling water!** La Croix is a great option. Although I love plain water, I don't actually love plain sparkling water. La Croix has *just* enough flavoring. I sometimes will add stevia drops if I am wanting a bit of sweetness with the fizz. I find this to be a great option if I am trying to kick the craving for a soda.