The Good Enough Diabetic: Staying Healthy While Enjoying Life

by BELINDA BRUNER

The Good Enough Diabetic

My A1c is 7.4, and I'm a good enough diabetic.

I've been diabetic since you had to purchase a bottle of strips and use one each morning as you pee. When glucose monitors came out, you had to plug them into an electrical outlet, and they were costly.

I have started and given up on a diabetic diet about fifty times. My finger pricks number in the millions.

This week I changed the insulin port (a hole in the stomach) and sensor (a hole in the arm), and I gave eight vials of blood at the lab (a hole in the other arm).

I'm skipping over the holes obtained during the ten years before my pump.

I Am Alive

If you can't tell, I am annoyed with having to live this way. But I am alive, and my A1c is 7.4—yes, I've had complications, more holes poked in my eyes with needles from cysts and retinopathy.

I also have four straight screws in four of my fingers where the rheumatoid disease crumbled my finger joints.

You see, I didn't present my symptoms until I had damage because the first line of treatment for RA used to be prednisone, and I knew from watching an old episode of *E.R.* that people with diabetes can't take prednisone.

I had little to no family support because my parents were busy dealing with their diseases, the ones they passed to me through the miracle of genetics. I did not appreciate the ADA magazine and their "diabetic family of the year."

It served to remind me that I was on my own, in debt for school, uninsured, and very ill.

You may be thinking...

- How did she manage with so much courage and grace?
- What tricks did she use to raise a child single-handedly and earn a Ph.D.?
- How could she manage to follow this up with a twenty-seven-year university teaching career?

There are several answers to those questions, but today I will present only one.

I'm a "good enough" diabetic. I cut corners. I ate lots of ice cream while seeking any legal source of endorphins I could find.

The "Good Enough" Diabetic Diet

Let me explain the diet I settled on about ten years ago because the principle behind it could help you design your diet. It is a simple idea.

For me, I had to be able to eat something I enjoyed, keep binge eating to a minimum, and quit the constant counting. I estimate for my pump's sake, but I don't eat numbers. I eat food.

The starch and sugar component I broke down as follows:

- Pasta
- Potatoes
- Rice
- Sweets
- Cereals
- Legumes
- Bread

Eating a healthy, fibrous cereal for a snack or breakfast lasts about three days for me and then I find myself eating Apple Jacks out of a mixing bowl. So I said no to cereal.

Keep The Sweets In Moderation

I eat sweets whenever I am eating away from home. A friend offers strawberry shortcake after dinner? Sure. A restaurant serves cobbler? Oh, yes!

How do I get away with this?

I do not have any sweets in my home. I quit baking. My pound of stock sugar has lasted me ten years. I never buy a box of cookies or donuts to "nibble" on at home. Even birthdays—if it is held at my house there is no cake.

This way, the only time I have sweets is in moderation, outside my home, a one-off deal. Then I provide insulin, and it's over. I go back to eating my usual healthy way.

Next page: Additional nutritional tips for being a good enough diabetic.

Legumes Are Packed With Nutrition

Legumes are the most nutritionally dense foods on the list of starches. Many cultures have survived on legumes, and flourished, including my own culture of Mexican people.

I mix dark red kidney beans with fresh soybeans, raw bell peppers, cilantro, vinegar, and pepper for a fabulous salad meal. Protein, starch, and flavor galore!

I eat as much from the legume category as possible.

Which Starch Will You Choose?

Pasta

I decided that the best part of pasta is what goes in it or on it. It is just starch in little shapes, but the coating makes you consume too much of it. If it is in a salad, or if I go to Italy, I will eat pasta. Otherwise, I will give it up. No pasta. I can live with that.

Rice

Rice is just the starch that fills you up when you are eating vegetables, such as in Chinese food.

If you enjoy Chinese or Thai food, which I do, it is not difficult to say to the wait staff, “No rice.” They will lean closer and question you, “No rice?” Stay firm. Repeat it, even if offered brown rice. Just say, “No rice.”

Bread or Potatoes? Why Not Both.

The hard part was choosing between bread and potatoes. You see, by this point, I was on a mission. In creating a diet that was real; a diet I could live with; designed for me by me, I was determined to choose only one dangerous form of starch and omit the others. Bread and potatoes are classic comfort foods to many of us.

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I tested living with bread but without potatoes. What I discovered is that if I keep bread in my home, I will eat it. I will consume a loaf in a day or two.

However, if I keep potatoes—real, raw potatoes in my home, they are safe. I have never reached for a raw potato in a time of stress or pain or exhaustion.

Ah, the lowly potato! Such a beautiful, shapely, and surprising piece of starch. There are so many excellent dishes one can prepare with a lovely little potato.

So as with sweets, eating out with diabetes can be a challenge especially when there's free bread. I know I should say no to the bread, but now I only have bread at restaurants or at someone's house.

Go Vegetarian If You're Not Fond of Meat

I’m not very fond of meat, and the potato is a decent meat substitute, especially when paired with vegetables, spices, and a choice from the legume family.

Indian vegetarian is my go-to food type for a special, home-cooked meal. No naan or basmati rice with the dish, but I got used to that. Potatoes are also great in Mexican food; omit the flour tortilla and have very thin corn tortillas, if any. Lots of fresh cilantro beats a tortilla any day.

You see, if you’re clever and determined, you can dump the diabetic diet. Quit counting carbs. Thumb your nose at the ADA. Eating is a social and emotional part of our lives; we are hard-wired that way.

The chances are that if you are reading this, you have more than enough genetic bad luck to cope with. Add self-denial to your plate, and you will be pretty miserable.

Skip The Fast Food

One warning! Never eat fast food. I have discovered something important. Fast food, besides being extremely unhealthy, only tastes good when you eat it fast.

Try it; get some chicken nuggets or a burger and try eating it slowly. It will become gelatinous, gluey wax paper right before your eyes, and it will taste as bad as it looks.

Stand up for your body’s desire to eat good food. Watch for symptoms such as sluggishness, blurry eyes, or excessive thirst; these things let you know when you need to back off the good life and diet for a week or two.

Seek pleasure. Let joy replace guilt. Give as much as you can to others, and you, too, will be good enough.