Why Diabetics Should Try the Zone Diet

by COLLEEN KELLY

What is the Zone Diet?

You may have heard of the zone diet, but what is the zone diet? As far as fad diets go, this diet has been around for several decades and emphasizes balancing protein, carbohydrates and fats at all meals. It was designed to reduce inflammation levels, subsequently reducing insulin levels. Inflammation is thought to be linked to various diseases such as type 2 diabetes, digestive issues and certain cancers.

The zone diet is based on the following principles:

- Eating a meal or snack within one hour of waking up.
- Starting each meal or snack with lean protein, followed by foods that contain carbohydrates and fats.
- Having small, frequent meals throughout the day, regardless of hunger.
- Consuming plenty of food that contains omega-3 fatty acids and polyphenols.
- Drinking at least eight 8-ounce glasses of water each day.

Why is the Zone Diet Recommended for People With Diabetes?

As a certified diabetes care and education specialist (CDCES), I spend much of my working days preaching the benefits of balancing macronutrients – carbohydrates, fats and proteins – to promote blood sugar control.

The zone diet is much the same; those who follow the zone diet are recommended to consume their macronutrients in the following ratios:

- 40% carbohydrates.
- 30% proteins.
- 30% fats.

In addition to these ratios, carbohydrates should be low on the glycemic index (low GI), meaning that they release sugar into the bloodstream slowly, promoting less of a blood sugar rise, improving satiety.

Those who have diabetes who choose to follow the zone diet may notice that it is easy to follow, especially if they are following the hand-eye method. To put it simply, the hand-eye method means that there is little that is required to begin the diet, aside from having hands and eyes to measure foods:

- The hand is used to estimate portion sizes. For example, a palm may be the ideal size of protein, while the thumb may be an easy way to measure fat, such as peanut butter.
- The eye allows you to visually estimate the portion sizes on your plate.

For those who desire to be more precise, zone block method allows for more precise measurements of serving sizes. Proponents of this method are assigned a specific amount of zone blocks (for example, a male may have

14 blocks and a female may have 11 blocks). This method can take some time to get used to and can be a bit tricky when learning how to calculate blocks.

Benefits of the Zone Diet for People With Diabetes

As you can see from the discussion above, the zone diet automatically regulates the number of carbohydrates consumed. It is common knowledge that carbohydrates impact blood sugar levels, though complex carbohydrates will cause less of a blood sugar rise than simple carbohydrates.

If you believe that following a specific diet plan can improve your blood sugar levels, the zone diet may be for you. However, it is designed to be a lifelong diet. As with any diet, yo-yo dieting can have an adverse effect on inflammation and weight gain, thus worsening blood sugar control.

Recommended Foods on the Zone Diet

If this seems like the diet for you, here are some recommendations of specific foods to get you started. These foods can also be incorporated into a healthy meal plan, regardless of whether you are following a specific diet.

1. Lean Protein

A diet that is moderate in lean protein can improve blood sugar levels. In the zone diet, you want to incorporate these foods so that they are approximately 30% of your plate.

Examples of lean proteins include:

- Poultry, such as chicken and turkey.
- Eggs and egg whites.
- Tofu.
- Lean cuts of beef.
- Low-fat dairy.
- Nuts and seeds.
- Fish.
- Pulses, such as lentils and beans.

2. Fats

Fats get a bad reputation – they are essential for our bodies for various reasons. It is a great idea to include healthy fats in the diet. If you are following the zone diet, you want to incorporate these foods so that they are approximately 30% of your plate.

Examples of healthy fats include:

- Nuts and nut butter, such as peanuts, almonds, pistachios and peanut butter.
- Oils such as olive oil, canola oil, avocado oil and sesame oil.
- Tahini.
- Avocados.
- Fish.

3. Carbohydrates

Carbohydrates are where this diet can get tricky. Carbohydrates are comprised of foods such as baked goods, bread, pasta, fruits and non-starchy vegetables. On the zone diet, certain carbohydrates are thought to be better than others.

The zone diet recommends foods that are low GI. Examples include:

- Fruits that are rich in fiber, such as apples, oranges, berries and plums.
- Grains such as barley, quinoa, oatmeal and whole-grain foods.
- Vegetables (starchy or non-starchy), such as chickpeas, squash, cucumbers, spinach, mushrooms and tomatoes.

The Bottom Line

The zone diet may be for you if you are desiring to follow a specific meal plan. However, as with all diets, there are rules that need to be followed. If you find any diet to be restrictive, incorporating some of the principles – while still eating moderately – can create an improvement for your health.