

Navigating Diabetes during the Holidays

November is Diabetes Awareness Month. According to the American Diabetes Association, when someone has type 1 diabetes the body does not produce insulin. On the other hand, type 2 diabetes – the most common form of diabetes—occurs when your body doesn't use insulin properly. With both types, people need to learn how to manage their sugar levels very closely and may need medication to help manage the condition.

Throughout the year, monitoring your sugar levels, eating properly, and getting proper sleep and exercise, are all part of your daily routine if you have diabetes. Then the holidays roll around and navigating the disease becomes a bit trickier. Tami Harker, an OSF HealthCare endocrinology APRN, discusses navigating diabetes during the holiday season. The first step? Plan.

“Plan ahead. The day of a gathering, see where your blood sugar is at. Are you in a good place going into the party knowing that eating your favorite food might raise your blood sugar, which wouldn't be the end of the world, or have you been running high all day and maybe need to get your sugars down with a little insulin – as directed – which might be a good idea,” says Harker.

Once you have your blood sugars in check on the day of your festivities, it is important to keep your routine as usual as possible before heading out – but do not overdo it.

“On the day of the event, it's better to eat. Some people think they just won't eat all day and then have a large meal, but it's better to eat some small meals or a few snacks before you go so you are not overly hungry and wanting to eat everything. I think planning is key,” Harker explains.

In addition to factoring in small meals in order to avoid overindulging, sleep is crucial as well. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), sleep loss can make it harder to manage your blood sugar, and when you're sleep deprived you'll tend to eat more, and prefer high-fat, high-sugar food. The CDC recommends aiming for seven to eight hours of sleep per night to guard against mindless eating – especially if you have diabetes.

While avoiding sugary foods is the goal, Harker says nothing is completely “off the table” at holiday celebrations, but moderation is important.

“Of course, aim to avoid those things you know have sugar – like frosted sugar cookies and cake with icing. They aren't an absolute no, but work them into your plan. Talk to your healthcare provider on some ways to navigate it. Like if you want to have a slice of pie, what else can you cut out,” says Harker.

Carbohydrates are also known to increase sugar levels, as your body breaks them down into glucose. The CDC recommends that people with diabetes aim to get about half of their calories from carbohydrates, and to try to eat about the same amount of carbohydrates at each meal in order to help keep your blood sugar levels steady throughout the day. When heading to a holiday gathering, use extra caution before indulging in foods that contain a high level of carbohydrates.

“Potatoes, bread, any pasta dishes, creamed vegetables – that is all going to have carbohydrates that raise your blood sugar, so minimize those. If your favorite is sweet potato casserole and you only get it once a year, maybe hold off on the roll or mashed potatoes and have a smaller portion of the food you really enjoy,” Harker cautions.

Additionally, Harker recommends bringing along a dish or two that you know fits into your diet that you can also share with your family and friends. You may not be able to control everything that is served at your holiday celebrations, but you can still enjoy them.

Learn about diabetes services offered by OSF HealthCare at <https://www.osfhealthcare.org/locations/medical-group/services/diabetes/>.