

Healthy Living: Back to Basics

Diabetes is a top health issue among African and Caribbean communities. It is an autoimmune disease related to poor control of the body's blood-sugar levels.

When we eat, food is broken down into sugars, which provide a source of energy for our bodies. With the help of the hormone insulin, these sugars are absorbed by the body's cells. Diabetes occurs when the blood-sugar level is high and the demand for insulin cannot be met. There are two types of diabetes, Type 1 and Type 2. Sufferers of Type 1 diabetes do not produce any insulin at all, whereas the cells of Type 2 sufferers don't respond to the insulin being produced. According to the results of the United Kingdom's National Health Survey 2004, African and Caribbean people are three times more likely to develop Type 2 diabetes than any other ethnic group. The National Health Survey (NHS) also noted that out of all serious diseases, Type 2 diabetes had the strongest link with obesity. Obesity demands the body to produce more insulin and, if not managed correctly with a balanced diet and exercise, it can eventually lead to diabetes. Diet and exercise will not only reduce the risk of developing diabetes, but is also good for overall health and obesity. A balanced diet should include all the relevant nutrients and vitamins from the five major food groups:

- 1) Meats, fish, eggs and beans The foods in this group are fantastic sources of protein, omega-3 fatty acids, vitamins and minerals.
- 2) Dairy Dairy products are a great source of protein and calcium. There are low-fat alternatives to most dairy products, meaning you can eat these foods without having to worry about gaining unhealthy weight.
- 3) Fruits and vegetables They provide our bodies with vitamins, minerals and complex carbohydrates.
- 4) Starchy foods This food group contains bread, rice, pasta and potatoes. These are excellent sources of carbohydrates and fibre. Try to choose wholemeal and wholegrain products where possible, as they contain more fibre and vitamins than the white processed varieties.
- 5) Fats and sugars It is important to choose what types of fats and sugars we consume daily. Unsaturated fats, otherwise known as 'healthy fats', are good for our bodies. They give us the essential fatty acids we need and can help lower our cholesterol. Fish, vegetable and olive oils are great sources of unsaturated fats, as are nuts and seeds. Try to avoid the saturated fats in cakes, biscuits, cheese and butter. Saturated fats raise your cholesterol and contribute to unhealthy weight gain.

Maintaining a healthy diet sounds simple enough, but let's be honest - we are all guilty of grabbing a portion of fast food every once in a while for the sake of convenience. Although this isn't too bad (in moderation), it is still important that we get essential vitamins and minerals on a daily basis. A one-a-day multivitamin is an ideal supplement that will ensure that you get the right amount of the right vitamins every day. Additionally, there are some vitamins, called antioxidants, which could help manage and fight diabetes. These antioxidants are vitamin C, vitamin E and beta-carotene. Antioxidants fight dangerous atoms, known as 'free radicals', which cause cellular damage that can lead to diabetes, as well as cancer and heart disease. Vitamin D deficiency is also believed to be a key factor in the development of diabetes. Most people of African and Caribbean descent will need to increase their vitamin D intake through supplements because of the lack of sunshine in the UK.

Exercise The NHS recommends that adults between the ages of 19 and 64 should either do at least two and a half hours of moderate-intensity aerobic activity every week, or an hour and a half of high-intensity exercise every week. We recommend exercises of moderate-intensity, including brisk walking, jogging and cycling, whereas high-intensity exercises might be aerobics, martial arts, skipping and playing sports. You should also engage in muscle-strengthening exercises on at least two days out of the week. This can include weightlifting, resistance training, and bodyweight exercises like pushups and sit-ups or yoga. For women, using resistance bands can be a great way to strengthen and tone your body as part of a weight-loss programme.