



HEALTHY EATING *A Family Affair*

Diabetes is a challenging disease that can also affect the entire family in many ways.

When one is dealing with diabetes, the entire family deals with it too. Diabetes care is a family affair as it will involve getting support from the family.

Family involvement is very important for someone with diabetes to cope with their daily self-care activities and to prevent diabetes complications in the long run.

Good family support can also empower a person with diabetes, and helps provide social and emotional support. In fact, family support is key factor in diabetes care; as it has been said, “It’s hard to do diabetes alone.”

GETTING SUPPORT

If you have diabetes, it is not always easy to bring your family on board with your new behaviours. Here are some tips and ways you can involve your loved ones to manage diabetes together:

- 1 Help your family understand the factors that contribute to diabetes and how it is being managed or treated. As genetics influence the likelihood of developing diabetes, particularly Type 2 diabetes, your family members may also benefit from following your lead and making healthier choices as well.
- 2 Make small changes and allow time for your family to get accustomed to any changes.
- 3 Help them to understand that people with diabetes do not need special foods or diet; in fact, the foods you eat to stay healthy with diabetes are generally suitable for the entire family to remain healthy too.
- 4 Describe how your eating schedule may be different from others and share tips on portion control and healthier eating with your family.
- 5 Explore new recipes and prepare healthier meals together.
- 6 Include your family members in food shopping and learn to choose healthier alternatives together.
- 7 Find fun activities to do together for family events as gatherings do not have to revolve around food and eating. Engaging in other activities can help get you and your family members to become more active.

GIVING SUPPORT

If you have a family member who has diabetes and is attempting to make changes, you can help him/her by:

- 1 Encouraging him or her to be proactive in their efforts to make changes to their diet.
- 2 Making lifestyle changes together to show support.
- 3 Offering healthy food options or preparing healthier meals at home.
- 4 Making exercise part of the family routine and participate in physical activities together



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TIPS FOR FAMILY GATHERINGS

Family get-togethers especially during the festive seasons can be a time of great anxiety for most people dealing with diabetes as the focus is often on food and eating. However, festive meals and traditions do not have to disrupt your diabetes control. With preparation and advance planning, a person with diabetes can face any holiday head-on, fend off stress, and still enjoy family meals to keep their diabetes management on track. It is not unusual for families to eat large meals at odd times. For example, Christmas meals may be served in the middle of the afternoon. Plan in advance so that you can schedule festive meals around your usual meal times.

- Be open about your diagnosis and your diet and lifestyle. Inform your extended family members ahead and let them know about your condition, dietary or meal requirements so that they may plan in advance the festive menu to include healthier food choices.
- Adjust your usual meal portions and do not be tempted to skip meals to compensate for the large festive meal. Eat a smaller meal portion or snack before you leave home. If you arrive to the gathering/ party hungry, you will be more likely to overindulge.
- If you are on insulin injections or taking a pill that lowers blood glucose levels, you may need to have a light snack at your usual meal time to prevent a low blood sugar level if meal time is delayed at the family gatherings. If you are unsure whether you should be having a snack, please consult your dietitian on this.
- Do not feel like you have to sample everything on the table. Have a reasonable portion of your favourite foods and pass on the rest. If you really want to try everything, make your portions smaller so that you try to keep your total carbohydrate intake with the recommended allowance.

- Keep yourself hydrated by choosing low-calorie thirst quenchers such as water and diet soft drinks. If you have to take alcohol, make sure that you do not drink on an empty stomach and remember to limit to just one alcoholic drink—e.g. one can of beer, half glass (100ml) of wine or one nip (30ml) of hard liquor.
- A balanced meal with vegetables is important. Unfortunately, the vegetable selection on festive menus is usually limited. Offer to bring a green salad or a side of steamed vegetables to the gatherings. Eating vegetables add fibre (bulk) to the meal and keeps you full to prevent overeating.
- If you are hosting a festive meal, make sure the menu includes healthy food choices such as fruits, vegetables and lean meats. Avoid adding extra oil in your cooking by preparing the food using healthier cooking methods such as baking, grilling, microwaving and experimenting with lower fat recipes. It is important to show support to the family member with diabetes by not encouraging him/her to binge eat.
- The best way to compensate for eating a little more than usual is to be active. Find time to exercise and maintain your usual exercise routine. Consider including fun family activities during these get-togethers that will get people away from sitting and eating. Encourage others to move before or after the meal. Fun activities may include taking a walk, dancing or playing active games such as dodge ball, hula hoop, etc.

Life with diabetes can be challenging, but when you are surrounded by people who love and care for you, it can be less stressful and this can help a person with diabetes be more successful with his or her diabetes control.



About the author: Mah Wai Yee is an Accredited Dietitian of Singapore (ADS) and is the Principal Dietitian at Farrer Park Hospital. She has special interests in weight management and eating disorders. Over the course of her career, Wai Yee has contributed nutrition articles to magazines and newspapers and conducted many nutrition talks and workshops.