

WEAR DIETITIAN

Dear Dietitian,

What is the difference between "sugar-free" and "suitable for diabetics" and "diabetic" foods?

Dear Reader,

The global rise in the prevalence of diabetes mellitus has led to a boom in the "diabetic" food industry. "Diabetic" foods have become popular since the 1960s when diabetes care focused on "sugar-free" and "low-carbohydrate" diets at the same time. As a result of this trend, a wide range of food products labeled "suitable for diabetics" or "sugar-free" was found everywhere to cater to the needs of people with diabetes.

However, this has caused some misconceptions about "diabetic" foods among people with diabetes. Some may misinterpret these claims as a stamp of approval to include; and some may even think that "sugar-free" products are beneficial, essential and suited for them.

In fact, "sugar-free" food products do not always mean carbohydrate-free. In most cases, the ingredients found in such "sugar-free" food products are made up of flour, fructose (fruit sugar), glucose syrup and even sugar alcohols such as sorbitol, maltitol, isomalt, which form part of the carbohydrate content. Hence, these food products are not exactly "sugar-free" even though their ingredients replace glucose or sucrose found in conventional food products. Food products labelled "sugar-free" or "suitable for diabetics" tend to be lower in carbohydrate content (not carbohydrate-free) but replaced with higher fat content which in turn does not make a significant difference in terms of calories content compared to the conventional food products.

Another main concern is that labelling these food products as "suitable for diabetics" undermines important messages about healthy eating. Moreover, "diabetic" foods are more expensive than conventional foods and results in people with diabetes spending more than they need to.

Let's compare the following examples of food products between the "sugar-free" ("suitable for diabetics") version and the conventional version:

	Chocolate		
Nutrients (per 100g)	"No added sucrose" chocolate with strawberry yoghurt	Toblerone Chocolate	Cadbury Milk Chocolate with whole nut
Energy (kcal)	557	525	545
Total fat (g)	37.0	29.0	35.2
Total carbohydrate (g)	45.0	60.0	48.2
Price per package	S\$5.60	S\$1.50	S\$2.60

	Cookies			
Nutrients (per 100g)	"Diabetic" butter cookies	Danish cookies	Chipsmore cookies	
Energy (kcal)	451	520	471	
Total fat (g)	22.8	24.0	20.4	
Total carbohydrate (g)	64.3	68	69.4	
Price per package	S\$7.85	S\$4.00	S\$1.60	

	Jam			
Nutrients (per 100g)	"Diabetic" jam	St. Dalfour "no added sugar " jam	Regular strawberry jam	
Energy (kcal)	451	520	471	
Total fat (g)	22.8	24.0	20.4	
Total carbohydrate (g)	64.3	68	69.4	
Price per package	S\$7.85	S\$4.00	S\$1.60	

Dear Dietitian.

Do people with diabetes have to stick to "diabetic" or "sugar-free" foods?

Dear Reader,

"Diabetic" foods can only be an option but not a necessity for people with diabetes. There is no single food people with diabetes must or must not eat and the "sugar-free" diet is no longer necessary for people with diabetes.

According to the recent published Joint Position Statement¹ on "Diabetic Foods" from the Food Standards Agency and Diabetes UK, the idea of special "diabetic" foods is out of date. The claim of "sugar-free" labels has recently come under the control of European Union (EU) legislation Regulation. Currently, such claims may only be allowed if substantiated. The Food Standards Agency of UK has advised food manufacturers that the "diabetic" claim is not necessary since strong evidence has shown that the healthy eating advice now applies to everyone, including people with diabetes.

Dear Dietitian,

Can my diet include sugar and fats?

Dear Reader,

Yes, but you should eat only small amounts of foods that are high in sugar and fats, especially saturated fats. Like everyone else, people with diabetes are encouraged to maintain a healthy body weight and adopt healthy eating with a diet low in fat, salt and sugar; and rich in fibre from fruits, vegetables and wholegrain products.

Reference.

1. Joint Statement on "Diabetic Foods" from the Food Standards Agency and Diabetes UK. Diabetes UK, July 2007.

This issue's resident dietitian is Mr For Wei Chek, Dietitian at National Healthcare Group Polyclinics. Email your questions for Dear Dietitian to dmlife@diabetes,org.sg or fax the questions addressed to the Editor, Diabetes Singapore, Diabetic Society of Singapore. Fax: 6553 1801

Type 2 diabetes is preventable in up to 80% of cases by adopting a healthy diet and increasing physical activity.