

10 Tips For Eating Well When You Have Diabetes

Monique Truong April 27, 2015



Swapping zucchini noodles in for regular pasta is a great way to keep glucose levels down. (Flickr)

When I was diagnosed with Type 1.5 diabetes (which means I'm somewhere between Type 1 and Type 2) at the age of 24, I was given a list of foods that were off limits to me: rice, bread, pasta, potatoes, beans, corn, peas, sodas, fruit juices, bananas, grapes, melons, pineapple, and, of course, cakes, pies, and cookies, just to name a few. What I should have been given was a list of foods to add to my diet. In fact, the only "new" food option that was offered to me was artificial sweeteners, which I tried and quickly decided that going without sugar in my coffee was better than the chemical aftertaste.

Whether you're a lifelong Type 1, a newly diagnosed Type 2, or a borderline diabetic, I encourage you to think of the list below not as poor substitutes for the "real thing," but rather as options and possibilities available to you that are satisfying, filling, and, very importantly, delicious. I've not always eaten this way or made these healthier choices, but within the past few years, I realized something very fundamental had to change about the way that I approached my illness. I've already tried to ignore my diabetes. I've already felt sorry for myself. I've already been disheartened and depressed. Occasionally, I've even been strict and Spartan about my diet and then horribly unforgiving of myself when I could not live up to the limitations. Now, I needed to be creative. I'm wired to obsess about food anyway, so why not obsess about food that I *can* eat as opposed to food that I can't?

A caveat: Making these food decisions has significantly helped me to control and reduce my blood sugar levels, but this list isn't meant to be definitive nor exhaustive. While my choices are informed by foods that have a low [glycemic index](#), my suggested uses and recipes for them are not necessarily meant to be low in fat or low in total calories, so these may not be the best dietary options for you. Testing your blood sugars before and after a meal is really the best way to determine how any food has affected your body. I encourage you to do so, and I encourage you to imagine for yourself a better, more creative way of eating.

Instead of pasta, choose zucchini noodles, a.k.a. zoodles.

With a simple hand-cranked [vegetable spiralizer](#), I turn fresh zucchinis into long, toothsome noodles. The zoodles are best left raw or very [lightly sautéed](#). They are especially delicious paired with a summery fresh tomato and basil sauce or with a cold peanut noodle recipe. I find that the best way to achieve an *al dente* texture is to lightly salt the zoodles in a colander, leave them for 20 minutes, rinse them well with water, and squeeze out as much of the water as possible using a dishcloth.



Cauliflower and cheese (Photo: Thinkstock)

Instead of macaroni and cheese, try cauliflower florets and cheese.

Especially in the colder months, my body craves carbs. It turns out, though, that what I actually crave are the flavors associated with carb-rich dishes, macaroni and cheese being a prime example. I now bake cauliflower florets (no need to parboil or boil them beforehand; just keep the florets medium to small in size) in the same [macaroni and cheese recipe](#) that I've made since college, adding some smoked ham or crumbled bacon for additional savoriness, and baking it for an hour or so. See the next tip for the crunchy topping that completes this dish.



Instead of mashed potatoes, try cauliflower puree.

Easy (as you can use a food processor) and so elegant with its gorgeous, smooth texture, a cauliflower puree is what I serve with a roast chicken, slow braised short ribs, or as the top layer of a shepherd's pie. You'll be particularly thankful for it at Thanksgiving when you serve it with your turkey and gravy. There are many [recipes](#) out there, but avoid the ones that call for a lot of cream and other rich dairy products. Cauliflower boiled or steamed till fork tender and then whipped in a food processor with a bit of warmed milk, some good butter, and a bit of salt are really all it takes.

Instead of rice, choose cauliflower rice.

As you'll see in the next three tips, the star of my list is the humble cauliflower. [This simple recipe](#) should be given to everyone when they are first diagnosed with diabetes, but it would have been particularly comforting to an Asian-American like me who grew up eating rice at almost every meal. I make a large batch of it, keeping the seasoning simple — usually olive oil, finely minced onion, salt, and pepper — at the beginning of the week and then adapt it to specific recipes. I add slices of shiitake mushrooms and fresh herbs for a pilaf; chicken pieces sautéed in a sofrito with red peppers and olives for a simplified arroz con pollo; or a touch of toasted sesame oil and sautéed garlic if I'll be serving the cauliflower rice with a Vietnamese dish.



(Photo: Thinkstock)

Instead of fresh breadcrumbs, choose some chopped almonds or walnuts.

I'm not a purist and haven't been able to cut out all the carbs in my diet. There are some foods, like bread and the fresh breadcrumbs, that still pain me to leave on the table. For instance, I like my macaroni and cheese to have a toasty, cheese-enriched top and without that texture I feel utterly deprived. My compromise is to reduce the amount of fresh breadcrumbs that I use by half or more by mixing in chopped almonds or walnuts. I toss the mixture with a bit of grated Parmesan cheese and melted butter before spreading it over my cauliflower florets and cheese then bake as usual. I think the resulting crunch is even better.



A popover can be a better bread option. (Photo: Flickr)

Instead of a croissant, choose homemade popovers.

For me and many other diabetics, breakfast is the toughest meal of the day, as it is full of bready, sticky-sweet temptations. On the weekend mornings when I find myself wanting a light buttery croissant, I make a batch of popovers, using the recipe from *The Joy of Cooking*, which calls for one cup of all-purpose flour for 12 medium-sized, crispy, airy popovers. Butter and a dollop of homemade jam (see below) add to the pleasure of having something special for breakfast or brunch.



Making your own marmalade lets you add a lot less sugar than store-bought versions. (Photo: Flickr)

Instead of store-bought marmalade, choose to make your own.

I hesitate to add this tip because I don't want you to think that I do this all the time because I don't. Recently, though, some friends gifted me a large bag of fresh kumquats. When life gives you California-ripened kumquats, you must make marmalade. My improvised recipe, cobbled together from [some examples that I saw online](#), used about a half cup of honey for about two pounds of fruit. It was truly eye opening to see how little sweetener is required when the fruits are flavorful, fresh, and not overly tart. So while life may not always give you kumquats, do think about the possibility of making your own fruit marmalade or preserves. What you'll find is that the flavor of the fruit shines

through when the sweetness is significantly reduced. A good honey will add not only sweetness but also delightful floral notes to the fruits. (Sugar acts as a preservative, so once you lessen its amount, plan on making only a jar or two and store it in the refrigerator for consumption within a week or two.)

Instead of a diet cola or other artificially sweetened soda, choose club soda and a splash of fruit juice.

When I'm on a flight or some other situation with limited drink choices, I'll often ask for a club soda with a short pour of apple juice. If there's a little cup of pre-cut lemon wedges, I'll ask the attendant to add a piece into the glass too. It's refreshing and with enough natural flavors to get me to my destination. Of course, you can also do this at home with freshly squeezed juices or purees, or throw a couple of raspberries into the glass and muddle them before adding the club soda. It's so much tastier than any bottled or pre-packaged drinks that I have ever found in a market.



(Photo: Thinkstock)

Instead of a cocktail, choose a flute of brut Champagne, cava, prosecco, or other dry, crisp sparkling whites.

I recommend brut Champagne and dry sparkling whites because they are generally [lower on the glycemic index](#) than most cocktails with their hidden simple syrups, fruit juices, and other sweeteners. Champagne is celebratory and never makes me feel deprived. It's also outrageously marked up in bars and restaurants. I can only afford one flute, which encourages me to sip, to savor, and to not overindulge.

Always choose the best.

It's never worth it to eat a subpar meal. You can define subpar for yourself, but for me it means food that is grown, prepared, cooked, and served without care. It also means eating something only because it's convenient or is cheaper. I'd rather fry an egg sunny side up in butter and soy sauce and serve it sizzling on a bed of cauliflower rice (which will be my lunch today) as opposed to ordering from a take-out menu full of "choices" that are, in fact, littered with questionable ingredients. Yes, it takes more time out of your day to think and to plan ahead for what you'll put into your body and the bodies of those whom you love, but "love" here is the operative word. It should inform all of our decisions, food and otherwise.

About the author: A best-selling novelist, [Monique Truong](#) calls Brooklyn home. Her debut novel, [The Book of Salt](#), took her to the 1920s Paris of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas. Her second novel, [Bitter in the Mouth](#), returned her

to the 1970s American South of her youth, and her third novel, *The Sweetest Fruits*, is bringing her to Meiji-era Japan. Truong is also an essayist whose works have appeared in *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *London Times*, *La Repubblica* and in numerous magazines.

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