



West Hertfordshire  
Hospitals  
NHS Trust



**A guide to...**

# **Eating for a healthy pregnancy with gestational diabetes**

*Patient information*

## **What is gestational diabetes?**

Gestational diabetes mellitus (GDM) is a type of diabetes that develops in pregnancy and often disappears after giving birth.

It can develop at any time but is more commonly seen in the second or third trimester.

GDM means that you are less sensitive insulin (a hormone that regulates your blood sugar levels), which causes raised amounts of glucose (sugar) in your blood. High blood sugar levels in pregnancy can be dangerous, which is why you will have monitoring from the diabetes doctor, obstetrician, nurse and dietitian.

## **What is the treatment?**

The aim of treatment is to carefully control your blood sugar levels. This is done through diet and exercise, with medications or insulin also prescribed as needed (which are safe to use in pregnancy).

## **What affects my blood sugar levels?**

The three main nutrients in your diet are carbohydrates, protein and fat. The glucose in your blood comes from the carbohydrates in the food you eat, not from protein or fat.



## What are carbohydrates and should I eat them?

Carbohydrates can be split into starchy and sweet (see table below). Both of these affect blood sugar levels. They are the body's main source of energy and should be included as part of a balanced diet. You should...

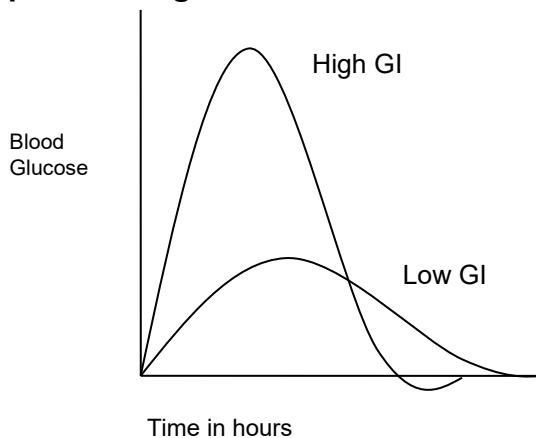
- **Include** some **starchy carbohydrates** at mealtimes, aim for about 1/4 plate balanced by a source of protein e.g. eggs, fish, meat, tofu and lots of coloured vegetables
- **Avoid** foods high in **sugar** i.e. most of the foods in the 'sweet section'
- **Include fruit**, choose whole fruit instead of dried or juice. Aim for one portion (handful) at a time and spread portions throughout the day.
- **Include milk and yogurt**. They contain a natural sugar called lactose but won't impact blood sugar levels unless large portions are eaten i.e. >200ml milk at one go or >125g pot yogurt. They are a good sources of calcium which help to keep teeth and bones healthy. Check the food labels and choose yogurt with less added sugar.

Starchy	Sweet
Pasta, noodles Bread Rice Potatoes Crackers Cereal; oats Flour Legumes and pulses	Milk, yoghurt (lactose) Fruit (fructose) Bakery products (pastry, cakes, biscuits) Chocolate Fizzy drinks/Fruit juice Table sugar Sweets Jams, honey, syrups

## What is the Glycaemic index (GI)

The glycaemic index is a measure of how quickly the body will absorb and digest the glucose content of foods. High GI foods are digested quickly and cause sudden and quickly rises in your blood glucose levels. Comparatively, low GI foods are digested more slowly; it will take longer for the glucose to reach your bloodstream so your blood sugars will rise more slow and steadily.

**A diagram to show the impact on blood sugar levels of low GI compared to high GI foods**



Glycaemic index doesn't tell us how healthy or unhealthy a food is. For example, a chocolate bar is low- medium GI but watermelon is high GI. So keep GI in mind when still keeping to a healthy diet.

## How to use the glycaemic index

The GI of a food is measured on its own, but we tend to eat foods in combination. Therefore, to try and reduce the overall effect of a meal on our blood sugars we can:

- Make swaps to low GI carbohydrate options (table below.)
- Include fibre in each meal (veg, beans, pulses, salad) which is good for your gut and slows down the digestion of the carbohydrate.
- Have carbohydrate foods together with some form of protein or fat, as this also slows down carbohydrate digestion, e.g. having eggs/peanut butter with toast rather than just butter. Whilst fat is high in calories, some healthy fats are an important part of our diet.
- Portion sizes are important—the more carbohydrate you eat the more it will raise your blood sugar, whatever the GI!

<b>Food type</b>	<b>Low GI option</b>	<b>Portion size</b>
Potato	Sweet potato, new potatoes, yam	The size of a small fist
Pasta	Al dente, noodles	1 cup cooked (approx. 100g)
Bread	Granary, seeded, multigrain, oat, rye, chapatti	1-2 slices
Rice/Grainss	Brown, basmati, long grain, quinoa, bulgar wheat, pearl barley, couscous	1/2 cup cooked (approx 30-50g)
Breakfast cereal	Porridge, muesli, bran-based cereals	1/2 - 1 cup

## Meal planning

This is one of the easiest ways to keep an eye on what you are eating. We tend to plan our meals around the carbohydrate portion, but in GDM we are trying to reduce your carbohydrate intake (without leaving you hungry). So how do you do this...?

1. Decide what protein you are going to have in your meal—protein is important for keeping you feeling satisfied and fuller for longer.
2. Add in lots of colour in the form of vegetables or salad (a mixture of foods keeps it more interesting).
3. Complement (rather than basing your meal around the carbohydrate) the meal with a starchy (low GI if possible) portion of carbohydrates.

## **Protein + Colour + Carbohydrate = a balanced meal**

Non-plant based protein sources: meat, poultry, fish (be cautious with those in batter/pastry/breadcrumbs).

Plant-based protein sources: quorn, lentils, pulses, tofu, milk and dairy (these typically also contain carbohydrates so be careful with portion sizes and what foods you combine them with).

Low GI carbohydrates: see page 4.

You can speak with a dietitian at your diabetes antenatal appointments if you would like more help or advice.

## **Breakfast ideas:**

- Greek yoghurt, 2tbsp porridge oats, small handful berries
- 2 eggs and 1 slice toast, tomatoes/spinach/mushrooms
- Cottage cheese, 2 ryvita/oatcakes
- Baked beans, 2 eggs, vegetables
- Toast with cheese/ham/tomato
- Wholegrain breakfast cereal or porridge

## **Light meals:**

- Wholegrain sandwich with lean meat/fish & salad.
- Small jacket potato with cottage cheese, tuna, reduced sugar baked beans.
- Peanut butter on wholegrain toast.

## **Main meals:**

- Lean roast meat/poultry, casserole, stew
- Shepherds pie with extra vegetables
- Vegetable curry with rice
- Fish and potato pie
- Chicken/prawn/tofu stir-fry with noodles/rice

## **Desserts:**

- Sugar-free jelly or instant whip
- Fresh fruit
- Low sugar yoghurt (skyr, liberte etc)



## Snacks

It's OK to snack but keep them small and spaced apart.

- 1 portion fruit (a portion is the size of a fist or handful) - eg. 1 apple, 2 kiwi, 1 handful cherries
- 1 small bag salted popcorn
- 1 crackerbread/ oatcake/rice cake with a low carbohydrate topping such as cheese, hummus, nut butter
- Vegetable sticks with dip such as salsa, guacamole, hummus
- 1 handful of nuts, seeds or olives
- 1 small pot of plain or greek yoghurt
- 150ml milk

## How can I eat less sugar?

In general it's best to eat a smaller amount of sugary foods and/or replace them with low sugar alternatives.

- Have a small portion of sugary food at the end of a meal rather than on its own to help slow down the rate at which the sugar is absorbed into the blood.
- Use 'sugar free' fizzy drinks, 'no added sugar' squash and soda water over full sugar drinks.
- Try using sweeteners instead of sugar
- Spread jam/marmalade thinly– even if they're low-sugar versions.
- Opt for plain biscuits, eg. rich-tea/garibaldi/oatcakes.
- Choose low-sugar yoghurts and fromage frais, e.g. skyr, liberte, light & free, muller light etc.
- Choose tinned fruit in natural juice over syrup.



## **What about alcohol?**

The general guidance is that women should not drink during pregnancy at all in order to keep the risks to you and your baby to a minimum.

## **Exercise and movement**

Being active and moving around can help to reduce your blood sugar level, as it uses up the sugar in your blood as fuel. Going for a walk after a meal can help to bring blood sugar levels back into target after eating, so keep moving as much as you can.



## Safe eating in pregnancy

Separately to managing your diabetes, there are still some food safety rules to follow, to ensure you and your baby are safe...

- Keep caffeine to a maximum of 200mg per day (1 cup instant coffee = 100mg, 1 cup tea = 75mg, 1 can diet coke = 40mg)
- Make sure to avoid undercooked meat, unpasteurised milk and cheeses, liver and pâté.
- Ensure eggs are cooked thoroughly and any reheated food is piping hot all the way through.
- Limit oily fish to two portions a week (fresh tuna, salmon, mackerel, sardines, trout). You can have up to four medium cans of tinned tuna a week.
- Wash your hands before preparing food and wash fruit and veg before eating.
- Keep an eye on use-by dates and only reheat food once.



## **A summary a dietary changes to focus on:**

This list is not exclusive but can make a good starting point for a healthy approach to eating during pregnancy with GDM.

- Eat regularly and do not skip meals to help maintain more stable blood glucose levels.
- Choose starchy, low GI carbohydrates where possible.
- Reduce your intake of high sugar content food and drinks.
- Include some protein at each meal– include a variety to keep this interesting and maximise your nutrient intake. E.g. lean meat, poultry, fish, eggs, pulses, yoghurt and cheese.
- Try to have starchy carbohydrate in combination with a protein and/or fat.
- Limit fruit to three portions spread out over the day.
- Try to have three portions of calcium rich foods a day. E.g. milk, green leafy veg, almonds, yoghurt, tinned sardines with bones. (Try to find calcium enriched versions of plant based milks if you use these)
- You do not need to buy ‘diabetic foods’.
- Avoid alcohol
- Opt for water, sugar free fizzy and no-added sugar drinks.

## Further information

NHS choices

Diabetes UK

[www.womenwithgestationaldiabetes.com](http://www.womenwithgestationaldiabetes.com)

## How to contact us

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If you need this leaflet in another language, large print, Braille or audio version, please call **01923 217187** or email **[westherts.pals@nhs.uk](mailto:westherts.pals@nhs.uk)**



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