

How to Navigate Thanksgiving With Diabetes

Diabetes doesn't have to stop you from enjoying the turkey and pumpkin pie.



If you plan properly and eat in moderation, your diabetes won't get in the way of you savoring a delicious Thanksgiving meal.

By Amir Khan Nov. 21, 2014 | 12:02 p.m. EST + More

Thanksgiving is a day to be thankful for what you have, but it's also become an excuse for people to throw their diet out the window and load up on mashed potatoes, stuffing and other carbs. However, people with diabetes don't have the luxury of not caring, even for one day, when it comes to what they eat, and that restriction can leave them feeling like they're stuck at the kids' table.

"The biggest challenge for someone with diabetes on Thanksgiving is the variety of high carbohydrate food choices readily available," says Monica Dorsey-Smith, a registered dietitian and certified diabetes educator with the Diabetes Resource Center at Sinai Hospital in Baltimore. "One Thanksgiving meal can include macaroni and cheese, candied sweet potatoes, turkey, stuffing and pies."

But don't despair – experts say people with diabetes can still have all their favorite Thanksgiving foods, including stuffing, mashed potatoes and pumpkin pie, as long as they follow these tips.

Plan ahead. Whether you're doing the cooking or heading to a friend's or family member's for dinner, know what's on the menu beforehand and plan what you're going to eat. "Diabetes or not, excessive

amounts of anything unhealthy should be avoided,” says Aaron Kowalski, vice president of the artificial pancreas division of JDRF, an organization that supports Type 1 diabetes research. “The challenge for people with diabetes is that they need to match the insulin they give themselves to the food they eat. People with diabetes need to plan ahead with their insulin when eating high carbohydrate foods.”

Eat in moderation. You want some mashed potatoes, gravy and turkey? No problem, says Dorsey-Smith. Just make sure you’re not piling it on. A good rule of thumb is to remember the USDA’s Choose My Plate recommendations. “Make half the plate vegetables, one-quarter protein and one-quarter carbohydrates,” she says.

Fill up on vegetables. Just because you can’t eat a mound of mashed potatoes doesn’t mean you need to go hungry. Vegetables such as green beans, carrots, broccoli or Brussels sprouts are free game, says Amy Kimberlain, a registered dietitian with Diabetes Research Institute. You can eat as many veggies you want – as long as you stick to the right ones. “Remember that winter squash, pumpkin, acorn squash and butternut squash are all carbohydrates,” she says. “While people with diabetes don’t have to avoid these foods, they shouldn’t include them with the non-starchy vegetables that they can have as much of as they want. These starchy vegetables have to be included as part of their total carbohydrate intake.”

Check your blood sugar often. Managing your blood sugar every day is crucial when you have diabetes, but even more so on Thanksgiving when you’re likely being a little more lax with your diet, says Paula Jacobs, a certified diabetes educator with Methodist Charlton Medical Center in Texas. Start by knowing how foods affect your levels, she says, and use that to figure out what to eat. Then, start checking your blood sugar two hours after you finish eating, and every hour or so after that. “This will give a picture of how you’re responding to the meal. About two hours is required for the food to be digested and enter the blood stream, so this time frame gives a good picture of how the meal is being processed by the body.”

Don’t skimp on dessert. While it might be tempting to fill up on turkey, be sure to save room in your diet for desserts, Kimberlain says. “Desserts at the holidays aren’t a potential challenge, they’re a given,” she says. “Over the last few decades it was thought that people with diabetes couldn’t have desserts at all. That’s not the case. Dessert simply has to be accounted for.”

Desserts are often carbohydrate heavy, so give yourself a budget of carbs for the day and save some for pumpkin pie, Kimberlain says. The American Diabetes Association recommends budgeting 45 to 60 grams of carbohydrates per meal. A half cup of a starchy vegetable like squash has 15 grams of carbs, as does one slice of bread. “If you had turkey and non-starchy vegetables like green beans or carrots, then there are no carbohydrates accounted for and you’d be able to have dessert,” she says. “What you wouldn’t want to do is have the stuffing, the corn casserole, the dinner roll and dessert, because you will have well exceeded your carbohydrates allotment.”

In the end, Thanksgiving is just another day, Dorsey-Smith says. So while it’s OK to indulge a little, it’s not worth risking your health over some wine and cornbread. “Be aware of your alcohol consumption,” she says. “Drinking can lower your inhibitions so that you eat more than you normally would. And don’t succumb to peer pressure. Stick to your plan even if your family and friends urge you to ‘cheat just this once.’”

“Remember,” Dorsey-Smith adds, “you can have a taste, but don’t go wild.”