

Healthier holiday foods for diabetics are for all

November has been designated as “Diabetes Month” and serves as the perfect opportunity to begin now to plan for the upcoming holidays. Whether you are managing your own diabetes, or trying to accommodate a family member who will be visiting, you and your family can enjoy tasty remakes of holiday favorites. Actually, the same types of healthy foods that are recommended for people with diabetes are the best choices for everyone.

According to the *Healthy Arkansas* website, diabetes has reached epidemic proportions in Arkansas. The prevalence of diabetes in Arkansas has been at or about the national average for the past 10 years. An estimated 227,000 adults in Arkansas have diabetes. The number of people with diabetes is rising with the aging of the U.S. population, the growth in minority populations – those most susceptible to Type 2 diabetes – and the increasing prevalence of obesity among Americans.

What is Diabetes? Diabetes is a metabolic disease in which the body does not produce or properly use insulin, a hormone necessary to move blood sugar into cells where it can be used for energy. Insulin is also needed to synthesize protein and store fats. Diabetes is a self-managed disease that requires daily adherence to diet, physical activity, blood sugar self-monitoring and often a medicine regimen.

Because diabetes is characterized by high levels of blood glucose (sugar), eating less sugar may help control blood sugar levels. Because people with diabetes have an increased risk for heart disease, total fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol should be limited. In addition,

people with diabetes are at increased risk for hypertension and stroke. Excess sodium can increase the risk of developing these problems.

Now that you have a little diabetes “know-how” under your belt, consider how you can make small changes to your family-favorites to make them both healthier and diabetic-friendly.

For example, would a traditional casserole taste just as good with fat-free or light sour cream instead of the regular? The green beans could be steamed this year instead of sautéing them in butter. Consider trying one or two changes to make this year’s dinner more healthy and diabetes-friendly.

Let’s talk turkey! Select a lean variety of turkey breast, one that has not been pumped up with butter, sodium or other additives. Check the label: If it says “self-basting,” it is high in fat and sodium. Pass it by.

To maximize flavor, slip spices and herbs underneath the skin right against the meat. This way you’ll get great flavor even after the skin is removed. Marinating overnight is the trick to a tender and moist turkey. Low-fat gravy can be made by cooling the broth and skimming the fat or using a can of low-fat chicken broth and then thickening with a mixture of cornstarch and cold water.

When considering side dishes, remember less (sauces, cheeses, etc.) is more. Try using herbs to reduce salt and forego the generous serving of salt. Rice dishes, especially those made with brown rice, are nice alternatives to cornbread dressing.

What’s for dessert? Think “lower sugar.” Reducing the sugar in a recipe will result in less carbohydrates per serving and, consequently, less effect on blood glucose levels. You can serve desserts with less sugar by using low-calorie sweeteners to sweeten fruit

fillings, sauces, puddings, and custards without affecting the quality since sugar is used primarily for the sweet taste in these foods. A thickening agent may need to be added because sugar lends a thick, rich quality. Many desserts can be made with less sugar or a combination of sugar and artificial sweeteners without affecting quality.

Sugar is important for volume, texture, moistness, and browning in baked products, so it's recommended that you use special recipes specifically designed for sugar substitutes when replacing sugar in baked foods such as cakes and cookies.

Pumpkin pie is not only a seasonal favorite, it is a good choice because it contains less sugar compared to pecan pie or holiday fudge. People with diabetes will need to check blood sugar before adding dessert. It may be wise to save it for a treat following an after-dinner walk. Contact the Extension office for the recipe for a healthier version of pumpkin pie.

Rethink your drink. Beverages must be counted in the overall meal plan. Iced tea can be offered unsweetened to allow each person to make his/her own choice of artificial sweeteners or table sugar. Alcoholic beverages should be avoided or served in moderation. Alcohol can cause low blood glucose in people taking insulin. Be sure to serve something to eat along with an alcoholic beverage if you or your guests choose to drink prior to the meal.

There are plenty of ways to lower fat, sugar, and carbohydrate counts in your favorite foods, but the real key to diabetes management and healthy eating is portion control. Contact the Extension office for recipes that show using herbs, spices, fruit juices, and sugar substitutes can create healthy holiday alternatives.

People with diabetes have unique dietary limitations and should consult a certified diabetes educator or registered dietitian about meal planning. Celebrating the holiday may

mean eating less of other treats, getting more exercise, increasing insulin doses, or a combination of all three.

For healthier recipes for roasted turkey breast, rice pilaf with spinach and pine nuts, pumpkin or sweet potato pie and traditional side dishes, contact the University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service in Garland County at 236 Woodbine in Hot Springs, call 501-623-6841, or e-mail me at Lgilmore@uaex.edu. Information is also available on the web at www.uaex.edu/garland.

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