Food Diaries: A Useful Tool in Diabetes Self-Management

Dietitians often tell clients and patients that controlling blood sugar levels to prevent highs and lows is an important aspect of diabetes self-management and that keeping a food diary, in the form of a physical book or journal, a computer software program, a website or app, or even a digital photo gallery, can play a key role.

What Food Dairies Offer

It's common knowledge that food diaries can track basic information such as portion sizes and the amount of food people eat. They also can track medication use; physical activity; nutrition information; levels of ketones, blood glucose and insulin; calorie counts; emotions and percentage of recommended daily intake. While all of these values are possible to calculate in a physical book or journal, many computer-supported programs and mobile apps have built-in calculators or memory banks that easily can provide this information. A review of studies done on mobile health (mHealth) applications in diabetes management found that digital food diaries were an effective method of diabetes self-management. Specifically, mobile phone apps were found to be more effective than computer-based programs for diabetes self-care. The mHealth apps gave patients the opportunity to take a more active role in their health management. When keeping a food diary to understand the relationship between carbohydrates, exercise, emotions and your blood glucose level, you can get results very quickly.

Food diaries can be an invaluable part of diabetes self-management. Diaries help your health care team to assess your carbohydrate counting skills and whether or not you are taking correct insulin doses. A food diary can identify unfavorable patterns in carbohydrate intake and can help you realize how often you might be splurging on unnecessary calories. An accurate food diary brings those quick snacks and sneaky calories to light. You might even find that by recording what you are eating, may cause you to think and limit or eliminate some snacks.

Although some people with diabetes are resistant to keeping a food diary, dietitians usually can persuade them once they see the benefits. A basic food diary is a lot of work, so another option is to take photos of your meals and snacks with a digital camera or your phone. You can take these photos along with your glucometer to your appointment with your health care team. A picture is worth a thousand words. Pictures of meals can truly help identify if you understand carbohydrate counting and if you are dosing your mealtime insulin correctly.

Despite the benefits of a food diary and the digital options available, some patients lose the desire to keep one because their health practitioner doesn't review or discuss it. Patients who have been asked by their health care provider to keep a food diary and/or a blood glucose diary and then the health professional does not look at it is very discouraging. For the tool to be of value, it needs to be reviewed, discussed, and appropriate recommendations offered by the provider at each visit.

Diary Apps

Everybody has their own preference for recording their food intake. Some prefer keeping a notebook, others like apps such as MyFitnessPal or Lose It! and some prefer a spreadsheet. For those who prefer to use a computer or mobile device, they can download
apps such as GoMeals and DiabetesCare.net, which have a MyCare Diabetes Tracker specifically for people with diabetes. MyFitnessPal or Lose It! have been highly recommended. If you're even the slightest bit tech savvy you can easily navigate either of these apps. MyCare Diabetes Tracker is another app that also keeps a record of blood glucose, medication, as well as typical diet and exercise.

There are thousands of apps and computer programs available. Ask your health care team to suggest ones that they and their patients have had their greatest successes with. If trying to evaluate programs/apps on your own use the work of FDA. Only consider program/apps that have been endorsed by FDA which will reduce your search to less than 20.

Older patients may find a handwritten food diary much easier to use than handheld devices. Written weekly food diary form broken down by the day of the week and each meal is most helpful. When creating a food diary, use columns for portion sizes, food/beverage, and carb content.

**Lifelong Learning Tool**

The greatest benefit derived from keeping a detailed daily food diary is in learning how certain foods and meals affect your blood glucose levels. Diaries are helpful to learn basic nutrition concepts such as understanding how to group foods into the three main macronutrients or types of calories: carbohydrate, protein, and fat. This knowledge helps you begin to understand the roles that carbs, protein, and fat play in balancing meals, promoting satiety, and improving after meal blood glucose responses.

Patients may prefer a specific method for keeping a diary, such as a handwritten form, a computer spreadsheet, or an app, but it's sometimes best for dietitians to initially hand their patients a diary. It's extremely helpful for your health care team to provide you with the actual diary so you can start ASAP and have no excuses. It's essential that your health care team takes the time and thoroughly go through your diary to reinforce what a great job you did, and why keeping a food diary is so important. This will help keep you on track and give you more incentive to continue this beneficial practice. To make sure that you and your health care team review your diaries, write out specific questions you have about things recorded in your diary.

**Diabetes Goal Tracker.**

From the American Association of Diabetes Educators, this free app for iPhone and Android users helps people with diabetes set, track, and achieve behavior change goals. It features educational materials, customizable reminders, a notes function, and an option to share completed goals with others.

**References**


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Control Diabetes for Life
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