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Tips for managing diabetes at home

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One in four Americans age 65+ now lives with diabetes according to the American Diabetes Association.

As a registered nurse and diabetes educator, my colleagues and I know that every day, people with type 2 diabetes are warned by their doctors to monitor their diet and stay active in order to control blood sugar and maintain their health. We know too how difficult it can be when they walk out the office door to follow the advice. When they get home, the kitchen shelves are stocked with processed foods, white rice and sugary cereals; it's difficult to find fresh or affordable produce in their neighborhood; and a regular fitness routine is one of those things they just never seem to get to.

Helping people better manage their diabetes and supporting them when lifestyle changes are needed is one of the most important things I do as a registered nurse and care coordinator. Following are some strategies you may find helpful:

Shop Smart

Eliminate refined sugar.

Add fruits and vegetables to the diet. If you can't get fresh, frozen is usually better than canned (check labels for sugars and sodium).

Not all fruits are created equal. Green means "go" for certain fruits: greenish bananas have less sugar than deep yellow ones, and green apples are better than red ones. Avoid grapes and raisins, which are high in sugar.

Stay away from white flour; choose brown rice and whole-wheat pasta instead.

Avoid salt and fat in cooking; if you do use fat, olive oil can be a great substitute for less healthy fats like butter.

Limit juices and avoid sodas

Control portions and don't skip meals.

Have sugary items such as orange juice or hard candy on hand at all times, in case of an emergency dip in blood sugar.

Focus on What You CAN Have

Offer meals that are roasted or sautéed in olive or canola oil rather than fried. Think spices rather than salt or sugary sauces. For a filling, healthy alternative dish, try legumes—lentils, chickpeas, beans— rather than white rice, which is high in carbohydrates. There are plenty of diabetes-focused cookbooks that are full of helpful tips like these. Begin with the simplest one to avoid being overwhelmed.

Meanwhile, don't underestimate the power of reward. With portion control and safety in mind, someone with diabetes (and their caregiver!) can indulge in a small treat now and then—say, to celebrate a good week. Think "fun-sized" candy bar. You may find, as our nurses often do, that once the good feeling of healthy eating takes hold, a couple bites of a sweet go a long way.

Steps in the Right Direction

The directive "Get plenty of exercise" can worry older people living with diabetes if it conjures up images of long jogging excursions or lifting weights at the gym. Instead, exercise can be part of daily life. A walk in the park or to the pharmacy

or a stroll through the apartment hallways to get the mail all count! When riding the bus, get off a stop early and walk the extra few blocks home. Take the stairs instead of the elevator, at least for a flight or two. Exercise can even happen in front of the television, with a series of leg lifts or arm circles done right in your chair.

Head to Toe Care

Diabetes is a systemic disease that affects the whole body. Pay careful attention to vision, as diabetes-related damage to delicate blood vessels in the eye can cause problems. When caring for someone with diabetes, communicate often about how well they are seeing. And be observant: if your loved one used to read the paper every day but now leaves it untouched, ask about their vision, and follow up with a doctor if necessary.

Solutions for healthier living truly begin at home—speak with a health professional if you have questions or concerns about your risk for diabetes. With the right home care support, the tools for managing your blood glucose levels are within easy reach.

To learn more about health plans that help elder New Yorkers live more comfortably, safely and independently in their own homes, please visit www.VNSNYCHOICE.org or call 1-855-AT CHOICE (1-855-282-4642). VNSNY CHOICE is affiliated with the not-for-profit Visiting Nurse Service of New York.