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Diet for those with gestational diabetes

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Content of this booklet

The mother's blood glucose level may be elevated during pregnancy, if the efficiency or secretion of insulin is not sufficient to cover the increased demand. The objective of treating gestational diabetes is to maintain a normal blood glucose level and prevent issues related to hyperglycaemia.

Healthy living habits are the primary treatment for gestational diabetes.

This booklet is intended for expecting mothers who have been diagnosed with gestational diabetes. It should not, however, replace personal guidance given by a healthcare professional. Please contact a registered nutritionist (M.Sc.) if you have any questions about nutrition.

Key points

- Good dietary choices and regular exercise are the best treatment for gestational diabetes.
- Balanced and regular meals even the blood glucose level.
- Opt for vegetables, high-fibre grains and sources of soft fat.
- By monitoring your blood glucose level, you can assess whether you eat regularly enough and whether your portion sizes are suitable.



Why does the blood glucose level rise during pregnancy?

Insulin is a hormone secreted by the pancreas. Its task is to extract sugar from food from the blood to the tissue. Usually, the pancreas prepares insulin on demand, lowering the blood glucose level quickly to a normal level after meals. During pregnancy, the amount of pregnancy hormones in blood increases along with the amount of fat in the body. These cause the efficiency of insulin to decrease and the blood glucose level to rise too high.

How is gestational diabetes treated?

It is important to keep the blood glucose level as normal as possible and weight gain moderate during pregnancy. High blood sugar during pregnancy may cause issues for both the mother and the child.

Correct treatment of gestational diabetes

- decreases problems with the functioning of the placenta
- reduces excessive growth of the baby in the womb
- prevents problems during childbirth
- reduces the risk of low blood sugar in the newborn
- reduces the mother's risk of developing diabetes later on.

Good dietary choices and regular exercise are the best treatment for gestational diabetes. Sometimes, high blood pressure must be treated with medication.



Impact of food on blood sugar

Foods containing carbohydrates elevate the blood glucose level. These include

- grain products, such as bread, porridge, pasta and rice
- potatoes
- dairy products, such as milk, yoghurt and curdled milk
- fruit and berries
- sugar and sugary food and drinks.

Monitoring the blood sugar level is an important part of treating gestational diabetes. Dietary treatment is sufficient, if the blood sugar level is less than 5.5 mmol/l in the morning before breakfast and less than 7.8 mmol/l one hour after a meal.

Diet as a treatment for gestational diabetes

Balanced and regular meals even the blood glucose level. You should pay special attention to the amount of vegetables and fibre in your diet as well as sufficient intake of soft fats. An example of a diet suited to someone with gestational diabetes is presented in Table 1.

Eat regularly

Eat at least four meals, i.e. breakfast, lunch, dinner and an evening snack with an additional 1–2 snacks when necessary. This will help keep your blood sugar level even and portion size under control as well as prevent unnecessary snacking. By monitoring your blood sugar level, you can assess whether you eat regularly enough and whether your portion sizes are suitable.



Table 1. Daily meals for those with gestational diabetes

Example meals eaten during one day		Amount of carbohydrates
Breakfast	2 slices of whole grain bread 2 tsp vegetable margarine 2 slices of low-fat cheese or cold cuts plenty of vegetables coffee or tea	20 g
Lunch	2 dl whole-grain rice or pasta one portion of fish, meat or vegetable-based food plenty of vegetables 1 tbsp oil salad dressing 2 dl fat-free milk	40 g 10 g
Snack	fruit nuts coffee or tea	10 g
Dinner	3 dl soup 2 slices of whole grain bread 2 tsp vegetable margarine plenty of vegetables 2 dl water 1.5 dl quark with berries	20 g 20 g 25 g
Evening snack	2 dl porridge 2 dl berries 2 dl fat-free sour milk tea	10 g 10 g 10 g
In total during the day		175 g



Opt for products rich in fibre

Nutritional fibre evens the rise of blood sugar after meals. That is why you should choose high-fibre grain products. Vegetables, fruit, berries, beans and peas are also high in fibre. Eat plenty of them as part of all your meals.

When half of your meal consists of fresh or cooked vegetables and you also eat whole-grain products, such as bread, pasta or a similar side dish, your meal will provide you with sufficient fibre.



Image 1. The plate model helps with putting together a healthy meal (VRN 2014).



Choose soft fats

Soft fat improves insulin secretion and lowers blood sugar. You can increase your intake of soft fats by:

- using vegetable margarine on bread
- using vegetable oils or vegetable or bottled margarine for cooking
- adding an oily salad dressing to your salad
- eating fish at least twice a week
- adding nuts and seeds to your diet.

By simultaneously favouring fat-free or low-fat dairy products and low-fat meat, the quality of fat in your diet will remain good.

Sweet things in moderation

Food and drinks containing plenty of added sugar, such as sweets, chocolate, pastries, juices and soft drinks, elevate the blood glucose level. Drink water, mineral water or tea and enjoy sweet treats as a dessert after your meal. This will help you keep portion sizes under control and balance your blood glucose level.

You can use artificial sweeteners, such as aspartame, acesulfame-K or steviol glycosides, to sweeten drinks. They do not elevate the blood sugar level and are safe during pregnancy when used in moderation.

Exercise helps with controlling the blood glucose level

Exercise improves the efficiency of insulin, lowers the blood sugar level and helps with weight management. Try to exercise as often as possible in any way that you find fun. You can also start exercising during pregnancy.

Text content: Riikka Suorajärvi-Bron, registered nutritionist
Sources: Syödään yhdessä -ruokasuositukset lapsiperheille. THL 2019.
Naistalo: raskausdiabetes. Terveyskylä.fi 2019.
Cover image: Pixabay
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