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Have a healthy Diwali – food swaps and recipes

It's autumn and almost that time of year again for Diwali, a festival filled with celebrations, time with loved ones, and of course lots of indulgent foods and sweet treats. If you have diabetes, poor heart health, or are managing your weight, it can be hard to restrict the delicious Diwali foods you enjoy. With help from two dietitians, we share planning tips, food swaps, and recipes so that you can celebrate a more healthy Diwali – without missing out on your festive favourites.

Make this Diwali a healthy one

For five days in November, the festival of lights will be celebrated all around the world. Alongside the beautiful lamp-lit homes and lovingly exchanged gifts, Diwali food will be a huge part of the fun – and you shouldn't have to miss out if you're managing a health problem through your diet, or just want to stay healthy.

According to dietitian Barbara Kovalenko, a nutritionist consultant for fasting app [Lasta](#), it's fine to allow yourself some of your favourite Diwali dishes, so long as you don't over-indulge for a long period and try to make some healthier food choices. Fellow dietitian nutritionist Yelena Wheeler agrees that balance is key.

The dietitians share their tips for a healthy Diwali.

Create your plan

This starts with planning ahead to help you stay in control – but be realistic and kind to yourself during the Diwali fun. Begin by setting yourself a realistic target, such as keeping your weight stable or not gaining more than 2lbs (just under a kilo) over the five days.

The next step could involve meal planning, so you can swap out some fatty or sugary ingredients for healthier ones – which we'll look into below.

Kovalenko says it's also about planning how you eat, not just what you eat: "use smaller plates to help control your portion sizes naturally. You should also try to [eat slowly and mindfully](#) as this helps you notice and stop once you feel full."

Savoury dishes

To look after your health, you need to limit the [fat](#), [salt](#), and [sugar](#) in your meals. This can be hard at Diwali, which is usually celebrated with high-fat fried foods like pakoras and nippattu and lots of salty sauces.

Heart-healthy savoury options

Along with the naughty ingredients, there are also many traditional heart-healthy ones. Wheeler says: "Look for foods that are high in [fibre](#), such as lentils and wholegrains, since high-fibre foods can assist with [lowering cholesterol](#)." This could include wholemeal chapatis, chickpea curries, and daal tarka.

Kovalenko adds that including colourful vegetables provides antioxidants that can reduce high cholesterol and [blood pressure](#). If you're eating meat – choose lean protein sources like grilled chicken or fish instead of fried which will reduce your fat intake.

Savoury options for diabetics

The same rules apply for those managing [type 2 diabetes](#). Wholegrains, vegetables, fruit, lentils and chickpeas can all help keep your blood sugar levels stable. In addition, watching your portion size is extra important for avoiding [blood sugar spikes](#) during the celebrations.

"And when you're faced with options, choose foods that are lower in [carbohydrates](#) yet will still provide good nutrition through [protein](#) and fibre," adds Wheeler. Examples might include tofu, chicken, or fish tikka.

Savvy savoury swaps:

- Cook using pure vegetable, sunflower, or **olive oil** instead of ghee, butter or coconut oil – which are high in saturated fat, the 'bad' fat that raises cholesterol.
- Add flavour with traditional spices and herbs instead of salt – cardamom, cinnamon, saffron, and turmeric are all healthy examples.
- Replace white rice and breads with wholegrain rice and breads – to keep your cholesterol down.
- Use tofu instead of paneer – for a more heart-healthy protein in curry dishes with less saturated fat.
- Bake treats that are usually deep fried – to significantly reduce fat content.

Sweets and desserts

No festival celebrates sweet treats quite like Diwali. You don't need to miss out, but it's a good idea to make at least some of these treats yourself to share with family and friends. That way, you can control what goes in them and make some simple swaps that are significantly better for you.

Heart-healthy Diwali sweets

Sweets (mithai) including gulab jamun, ladoos, and halwa tend to contain a lot of saturated fats and added refined sugars. Many are made with ghee, a clarified butter that can raise the bad cholesterol associated with [cardiovascular disease](#).

Try to limit how many sweets you have, or if you are making sweets, replace saturated fats like ghee and butter with unsaturated fats such as olive oil, vegetable oil, or sunflower oil. Even better, a dessert based around [nuts](#) and dried fruit can satisfy your sweet tooth while giving you vitamins, fibre, protein, and other micronutrients that can reduce your risk of [heart disease](#)².

Diwali sweets for diabetics

As well as the heart-healthy advice above, Wheeler says that people with type 2 diabetes should eat simple carbs – such as sweets – alongside protein, good fats such as Greek yoghurt and fibre because, "digesting protein and fibre at the same time can prevent your blood sugar levels from spiking."

Kovalenko adds "Put fresh fruits into desserts, like berries or papaya – these provide natural sweetness with fibre, and this helps better blood sugar control."

If you're eating more sweets than usual, monitor your blood sugar levels at regular intervals and watch out for the signs they have risen – including unexplained thirst, tiredness, and the need to pee more often.

Smart sweet swaps:

- Add sweetness with fresh fruit, dates and other dried fruits – instead of refined sugars such as white sugar, brown sugar, palm sugar and high-fructose corn syrup.
- If you need another type of sweetener, **Diabetes UK** recommends using a granulated sweetener which won't cause your blood sugar to rise as much³.
- Swap whole milk for semi-skimmed or low-fat milk – to reduce the calories and saturated fat content.
- Bake with whole wheat flour in place of refined flour – for higher fibre content that helps control blood sugar.
- As with savoury dishes, using pure vegetable, olive or sunflower oil instead of ghee, butter or coconut oil – which are high in saturated fat. Only use a small amount of these oils.

Diwali drinks

Whether you're protecting your heart, living with diabetes or both, drinking advice remains the same – limit or abstain from high-calorie and sugary drinks. This is true all year round, but it's especially important if you're eating more over Diwali, where foods are extra indulgent and packed with lots of salt, sugar, and saturated fats.

You should try and limit:

- Coffee and tea – as the [caffeine](#) content can increase blood pressure, which increases your chances of serious heart problems, like [heart attack](#) and [stroke](#), as well as diabetes complications, like severe [kidney, feet, and eye issues](#).
- Fizzy drinks and fruit juices – as these contain added sugars.

Drink [lots of water](#). This can also help you to control you're eating, as sipping water throughout the day – and especially before snacks – can increase that feeling of fullness.

A note on alcohol

Drinking alcohol over Diwali is a personal choice for many reasons, but no matter your decision, factor in the **health effects of drinking**. According to Wheeler, it's best to not drink alcohol over Diwali, or to drink a small amount. Here's why.

- Most alcoholic drinks – such as beer, wine and cocktails – can contribute to weight-related heart problems because they add a significant number of calories in your diet.
- If you have diabetes, be particularly mindful of cocktails and juice-based mixers for the high sugar content.
- Alcohol is an appetite stimulant and can lead to over-eating, which can be particularly dangerous around moreish Diwali fried and salty snacks.
- Drinking too much alcohol on an empty stomach can cause blood sugar levels to drop dangerously low in people with diabetes.

Other tips for a healthy Diwali

Make exercise part of the festivities

This can help you avoid [weight gain](#) and will also help to manage your blood sugar levels if you have diabetes. To make this part of your Diwali celebrations, choose activities that involve family and friends – perhaps a long walk in your favourite nature spot or dancing at a Diwali party.

Check blood sugar levels more often

"For those managing diabetes and heart issues, I'd recommend you monitor your blood sugar levels more than usual to make sure they don't get too high," Kovalenko says. But if you do have one or two high readings, don't worry too much – according to Diabetes UK, your long-term control should still be okay, but you should try to avoid repeated high readings.

Avoid skipping meals

You may be tempted to make up for all the extra dishes and treats shared with family and friends by skipping meals earlier in the day. In reality, this makes you more likely to eat more unhealthy foods later. Also, if you're managing diabetes, a missed meal can create an imbalance between food intake and insulin production, potentially leading to a [drop in blood sugar](#).

Get support from family and friends

Don't forget you can always ask your loved ones for support. You might ask them not to gift you mithai, suggest alternatives like fruit baskets and candles, or perhaps make a family event out of cooking one of the healthy Diwali recipes below – anything to make your healthier Diwali easier and enjoyable.

Healthy Diwali recipes

We've chosen a few healthy Diwali recipes to inspire you this November – enjoy over the festive season, but remember to limit ghee, butter, and even natural sugar even more throughout the rest of the year. You can find plenty more ideas on sources such as [Diabetes UK recipes](#) and [Heart UK recipes](#).

Savoury Diwali recipes

- **Pyaj pakora baked battered onions.**
- **Mutter paneer with a twist.**
- **Chickpea curry.**



Sweet Diwali recipes

- **Sugar free besan ladoo.**
- **Vermicelli kheer pudding.**
- **Anjeer dried fruits, nuts and fig roll.**



Further reading

1. [Hosseinabadi and Nasrollahzadeh: Effects of diets rich in ghee or olive oil on cardiometabolic risk factors in healthy adults.](#)
2. [British Heart Foundation: Are nuts good for you?](#)
3. [Diabetes UK: Sugar, sweeteners and diabetes.](#)
4. [Diabetes UK: Diabetes and blood pressure.](#)

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