

Healthy Caribbean Cuisine

The incidence of Type 2 Diabetes amongst the Afro-Caribbean population is double that of the wider general population.

There is currently more research being carried out into Type 2 Diabetes and genetics and ethnicity are recognized as being contributing factors to the development of the condition. It is not only about genetics and ethnicity though, general health issues are also very important.

A healthy diet is the cornerstone to general health and so is the diet pivotal to the treatment of Type 2 Diabetes. This does not mean that traditional Caribbean food is unhealthier than Western food, but as with any cuisine there are indulgences which can be pitfalls to healthy eating. Any diet with excessive calories will result in weight gain.

Afro-Caribbean foods can be very healthy with staples such as fish, rice, yams, sweet potato and cassava, other fruits, vegetables, legumes and pulses. All of these are low in fat and have a low glycaemic index.

Some Caribbean dishes are also high in fibre, for example West Indian soups.

Unfortunately, it is often the cooking methods and the added fat and sugar that divides foods into categories of healthy and unhealthy.

The following are Afro-Caribbean foods with a high fat content:

Fried foods such as dumplings and fritters.

Jerk chicken.

Chicken with skin on.

Cooked vegetables which have had butter added.

Dishes which have had creamed coconut added during cooking. Coconut cream or milk is especially high in saturated fat and, calorie wise is the same as whipping cream.

Full fat dairy products, such as cheese, butter, condensed milk, evaporated milk.

Ackee and avocado pear. Although avocados are fruit, they are high in fat. One avocado pear contains the same amount of fat as 15 squares of chocolate

Palm oil is often added to dishes to give flavour and colour. Palm oil is not only pure fat but it also contains a high percentage of saturated fat.

There are always substitutes and other ways to make what you eat healthier:

Try to cut down on the amount of fat you use in cooking. It is vital to measure the amount of oil or butter added. Make it your aim to gradually reduce the amount of fat used in cooking.

Try to choose oils which are high in monounsaturated fats e.g. rapeseed and olive oil.

Although they contain the same number of calories weight for weight, when compared to other oils, the type of fat in them is better for your heart

Avoid the regular use of creamed coconut and coconut milk in cooking. These are very high in fat and saturated fat. There are lower fat coconut milk and creams available. Alternatively, add low fat natural yoghurts to the dish.

Remove all visible fat from meats and remove the chicken skin before seasoning.

Skim the fat off from the top of stews and one-pot meals after cooking

Substitute full fat dairy products with lower fat versions.

No traditional food or dish is forbidden; moderation is the key to any healthy cuisine.