

Special foods for diabetics are not necessary

BfR Opinion No. 017/2008, 23 August 2007

The recommendations for a healthy diet for the general population now also apply to diabetics. For years a strict diet with a ban on sugar and the exact counting of bread units (BUs) was part of the daily life of diabetics. In order to make it easier for diabetics to comply with their diet instructions, industry developed special foods for them. A study indicates that today almost 50% of diabetics regularly consume special diabetic products although they are no longer recommended by scientific circles.

Diabetes is a metabolic disease which leads to the body no longer producing insulin (type 1) or to the insulin not being taken up by cells (type 2). Both variations of the clinical picture lead to a situation where dietary sugar does not penetrate the cell interior in order to act as an energy source or energy store. Instead, the ingested sugar accumulates in the blood, the blood sugar level rises and the sugar is excreted unused in urine.

Hence, for a long time diabetics had to strictly control the sugar in their food or replace it with sugar substitutes like fructose. However, diabetes is not just a disease which changes the sugar balance; it likewise involves disruptions of protein and fat metabolism. Hence treatment that only regulates sugar balance is not adequate. People suffering from type 2 diabetes in particular are afflicted by metabolic disorders long before the disease is diagnosed. In order to prevent the disease or to treat it later, individual food patterns must be changed. This includes things like the daily consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables because these foods contain a great deal of roughage in addition to antioxidative substances. In contrast, special diabetic foods are not necessary.

Against this backdrop BfR believes that special provisions for diabetic food are no longer necessary. Reduced sugar foods should not, therefore, be sold as dietetic foods. According to current scientific knowledge there are no criteria which justify this classification. For the above-mentioned disease all the claims on food like "suitable for diabetics" should be removed. Nonetheless, BfR has been advocating for a long time that the selection of packaged foods for diabetics should be simplified with the help of extended, uniform nutrition labelling. Not only diabetics but all consumers would benefit from this.

The full version of this BfR Opinion is available in German on http://www.bfr.bund.de/cm/208/spezielle_lebensmittel_fuer_diabetiker_sind_nicht_noetig.pdf