Cooking Challenge 101

Diabetes dishes that are healthy for everyone

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When Leticia Moreinos Schwartz committed to being a spokesperson for a health education campaign called “Desafiando La Diabetes,” to educate Latinos about type 2 diabetes, she relished the opportunity to also transform traditional recipes into more diabetes--friendly dishes.

Pharmaceutical company Merck sought out the Brazilian chef, teacher, food stylist and cookbook author who specializes in Latin cuisine for the campaign. Merck wanted Moreinos Schwartz because of her culinary expertise and passionate commitment to educating Latinos about managing type 2 diabetes.

Type 2 diabetes is the most common form of diabetes. The illness causes blood sugar levels to rise because the body is unable to properly use insulin, a hormone that regulates the amount of glucose in the blood.

After struggling with the disease for many years, Moreinos Schwartz’s grandfather died of a stroke, one of many serious complications type 2 diabetes can cause. “I was probably 15 or 16 at the time,” she recalls. “I noticed that my grandmother wasn’t completely educated about how to treat diabetes and how to help my grandfather control his A1C number. Also, she didn’t know what types of foods she should prepare for him and the family.”

The A1C number is derived from a test that measures the average amount of glucose, or sugar, in your blood for the previous two to three months. Guidelines for the American Diabetes Association suggest many people with diabetes should have an A1C number of less than 7 to help reduce the risk of complications, such as heart disease and stroke. (Remember, everyone is different, and a higher or lower A1C goal may be appropriate for some people.) However, nearly half of people with diabetes don’t have an A1C number that’s below 7.

Better management of Moreinos Schwartz’s grandfather’s A1C number might have added years to his life. Instead, his death dealt the family a blow. They were shaken and saddened not only by his passing, but also because “we started to realize that maybe this could have been avoided if we had more information about the disease and a better comprehension of it,” she says. “That’s when we started to really pay a lot of attention to our lifestyle and to exercise a lot more; our minds became very conscious about healthy living.”

As in many families, food plays an important role in the social dynamics of Moreinos Schwartz's family. But when her grandfather died, they looked harder at their food choices. "We were eating traditional Latin foods, and all of a sudden we had to modify," she says. "I was always into the food, and I thought I would have to stop eating meals with ingredients that are really iconic to us in Brazil—the same ingredients we share with the rest of South America. But I knew I'd have to modify my diet in order to take good care of my health."

Diet modification is also the solution the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) offers to address statistics showing that diabetes disproportionately affects African Americans and Latinos. When Merck requested Moreinos Schwartz's support on its campaign, she was eager to help educate others about the importance of understanding how high blood sugar levels can eventually lead to serious long-term health problems. Also, being a chef, Moreinos Schwartz was excited to take on the culinary challenge of creating dishes that are not only healthy and nutritious for those living with diabetes, but also tasty and enjoyable recipes for the whole family.

Experts have long stressed that diabetes doesn't mean you must deprive yourself of all your favorite foods. Many flavorful substitutions can be made to excite the taste buds and satisfy your appetite. In Moreinos Schwartz's cooking classes, she stresses how to season food properly. "When you know how to season and you use salt and pepper and herbs and spices from the very beginning, you don't need that much extra salt to flavor the food, which is huge," she says.

Moreinos Schwartz also uses chicken stock to add flavor to food, bypassing the butter, cream, cheese or any of "those things that aren't really good for you," she says. She encourages folks to make their chicken stock at home or buy some of the low-sodium brands, which are healthier.

Indeed, learning what to eat and making healthful choices can make you feel better. But not only that: Modifying your diet can help you lose weight and lower your risk of some of the scarier complications caused by diabetes, such as heart disease, stroke, kidney problems, blindness and amputation. "Knowledge is power. Learning how the foods you eat affect your health and well-being gives you the power to become healthy, live longer, and feel better every single day," says Joel Fuhrman, MD, author of the best-selling book The End of Diabetes.

"When you eat a diet rich in healthy, natural foods from the earth, you give your body the nutrients it needs to heal and protect itself," he continues. Fuhrman also believes that type 2 diabetes is a disorder triggered by not making the proper food choices that could help extend our lives and prevent many of the diseases that we face.

But there's more to controlling and managing diabetes besides choosing healthier foods and changing the way they're prepared. "We can't emphasize enough the importance of people talking about nutrition, knowing their A1C number and developing a personalized plan with their doctor," Moreinos Schwartz stresses.

What's more, a diabetes-friendly diet isn't only a good idea for those living with the disease. Experts at the Mayo Clinic believe a healthy eating plan that is rich in nutrients found in fruits, vegetables and whole grains, which is automatically low in fat and calories, is the most nutritious diet for almost anyone.

"Choose recipes that are good for the whole family," Moreinos Schwartz suggests. "Make it a family affair. When the family is involved, this tends to lead to a more successful outcome for a family member

with diabetes.”

But what about dessert? Sweet treats at the end of a meal are also a traditional part of many families’ dining experience. Moreinos Schwartz agrees, but she stresses that for those with diabetes, allowing themselves sweets is part of a discussion to be had with their doctor. “It’s more appropriate that each person develop a plan with their doctor to control diabetes, and that will include the consumption of sweets,” she advises.

Still, the chef does agree that sweet treats can also be modified and made more diabetes-friendly, even rich and creamy Latin desserts such as arroz con leche. “This is another traditional Latin dish that we have adapted with a lot less sugar,” she shares. “When we give a tasting of that, people go crazy.”

If you want to see for yourself, check out Moreinos Schwartz’s recipe for this crowd-pleaser in the sidebar on this page. This sweet treat is one of Moreinos Schwartz’s diabetes-friendly recipes that she created to be generally lower in sodium, carbohydrates, saturated fat, trans fat and cholesterol, and higher in fiber than its traditional counterpart.

But portion control is also part of the equation. “We try to encourage people to eat a lot less,” she cautions. That means enjoying just a tablespoon or two of the creamy creation instead of scarfing down a whole bowl.

Says Moreinos Schwartz, “Again, I think a successful way for someone with diabetes to go about including sweets in a meal plan is to really talk to their doctor.”

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