

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a red and white patterned top, is holding a white, rounded meal replacement bottle. She is looking slightly to the right with a soft expression. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with green foliage.

# Meal in a bottle

If you find yourself in a rush or on the go without a meal at the ready, a meal replacement drink might just be the answer **By Alyssa Schwartz**

If it seems like a hassle to figure out the difference between calories and carbs, or saturated and unsaturated fats, meal replacement drinks might seem like a tempting solution. Promoted as a tasty, all-in-one source of nutrition, they are easy to consume on the go. And the *Canadian Diabetes Association (CDA) Clinical Practice Guidelines for the Prevention and Management of Diabetes in Canada* recommended them for the first time in the 2013 edition, noting that substituting them for regular food at one to two meals per day can help people with type 2 diabetes lose weight—and improve their blood glucose (sugar) levels as a result. But you might also reach for them if you are regularly eating on the run and find yourself with limited options for nourishment.

“A lot of people struggle with what to eat, especially if they haven’t prepared food in advance. Their selection is often what’s fast and nearby,” says Joanne Lewis,

diabetes education manager for the CDA. “Often those food choices could be higher in calories than what you’d get in a meal replacement drink.”

“Meal replacement drinks are not an excuse to eat without a plan. Ideally, people should plan proper meals and use food as their main source of nutrition.”

– Joanne Lewis, diabetes education manager,  
Canadian Diabetes Association

### **NO SUBSTITUTE FOR MEAL PLANNING**

With set amounts of carbohydrates, protein, fat, and fibre all ready to go in a pre-portioned container or easy-to-measure mix, these drinks can give people with diabetes the key nutrients they need to stay energized and keep their blood sugar levels steady. But, Lewis cautions, “it’s not like you can just replace food with a meal replacement drink and forget about meal planning. If you’re going to replace food with one of these drinks, you need to consider what will be the impact on your blood sugar. Are you going to have to adjust your medication or supplement your meal with other foods to prevent low blood sugar [hypoglycemia]?”



“If you’re substituting meals with meal replacement drinks and you’re trying to be consistent with your carbs to prevent low or high blood sugar, make sure your choice is similar in carb content to what your typical food would be.”

– Joanne Lewis, diabetes education manager,  
Canadian Diabetes Association

Some meal replacements—many protein shakes, for example—may contain smaller amounts of carbohydrate than you might get from regular food, creating a possible risk for hypoglycemia, especially for people with type 1 diabetes and those with type 2 diabetes who take medication. “There’s a risk that if you have a protein drink without the carbs, it could cause low blood sugar unless you supplement it with something like both yogurt and some fruit,” says Lewis. Because keeping blood sugar levels consistent is important, she recommends choosing options that contain a similar number of carbohydrates to what you would normally get, or adding extra foods to make up for the shortfall.

### SATISFYING SIPS

Making meal replacement drinks feel more like a meal can help ensure you will not feel hungry. “When you sit down to eat food, there’s a connection with your brain that you’ve sat down and eaten food,” says Lewis. “There’s satisfaction that comes from actually eating a meal.

“When you just drink a supplement, it doesn’t really register the same way as it does when you’ve eaten. Part of that may be because you consume it so quickly. People can slug back a meal replacement drink in no time at all, and there’s not that enjoyment of sitting down and enjoying a meal. You might feel like you haven’t eaten enough, even if technically it’s equivalent to having eaten food.”

These pre-portioned drinks often have a set number of calories. “It’s similar to when people choose to eat portion- and calorie-controlled frozen meals,” says Lewis.

“If they are used to eating more than that and need more food to feel satisfied, they’re going to have to supplement their meal replacement drink, or else they’re going to be hungry soon afterwards and potentially make choices that may not be the healthiest.”

Some options worth considering? Whole-grain toast or crackers, fruit, or yogurt or other milk products will add carbs and more nutrients. “Meal replacements are designed to be nutritionally balanced,” notes Lewis, “but they’re not going to contain that full complement of phytochemicals [chemical compounds found naturally in plants] and disease-preventing nutrients you find in regular food. There’s so much that is beneficial in food that we haven’t been able to isolate and put into a can.”

But keeping all this in mind, Lewis says meal replacements can be a positive solution. “It’s not an excuse to avoid planning meals,” she says. “But when you can’t find anything nearby that’s healthy to eat, having a meal replacement drink at the ready can be very handy.”

### Did you know?

- **Large portion sizes make it easy to overeat when dining in restaurants or on the go.** To keep portions in check, consider ordering a half order, choosing an appetizer instead of a main, or sharing a meal with a friend. To read more from “Eating Away From Home,” visit [diabetes.ca/eatout](http://diabetes.ca/eatout).

## HOW DO THEY STACK UP?

Product	Calories	Total fat (g)	Saturated fat (g)	Protein (g)	Sodium (mg)	Carbohydrates (g)
Boost Diabetic, Chocolate (237 mL)	190	7.0	1.0	16.0	220	16.0
Life Brand Complete Meal Replacement Shake (235 mL)	250	6.7	0.8	9.4	250	38.0
Glucerna Wild Berry (237 mL)	225	8.2	0.8	11.3	250	26.7
Ensure Regular Vanilla (235 mL)	250	6.7	1.0	9.4	250	38.1
Slim Fast, French Vanilla (295 mL)	250	6.5	1.0	13.0	300	35.0