

Going Carb Crazy?



Are high carbohydrate foods fattening and unhealthy? Should you be following a low-carb, high protein, high fat diet? Let's take a closer look at carbohydrates to find the answer.

Carbohydrates 101

What is a carbohydrate? Carbohydrates are one of the three macronutrients in the diet that provide us with energy (calories) – the other two being fat and protein. Carbohydrates are the primary fuel source for cells in the brain and bloodstream, and muscles rely on a steady supply of carbohydrates to support physical activity. Think about trying to run a car without gas, carbohydrates are your body's fuel source.

Types of Carbohydrates

Carbohydrates can be broken down into two major categories.

1. Sugars or Simple Carbohydrates:

Simple carbohydrates are 1 or 2 sugars bonded together and are easily broken down in digestion. Examples of simple carbohydrates are fructose (fruit sugar), lactose (milk sugar), and sucrose (table sugar). Glucose, or blood sugar, is a single sugar or monosaccharide, that all carbohydrates, except for fiber, are converted into and is the energy source for all cells of the body.

2. Complex Carbohydrates:

Complex carbohydrates are large molecules containing many hundreds and sometimes thousands of sugars bonded together. It takes some time for your body to digest or break apart these sugars especially when fiber is present, as in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. The result is a slower release of sugar into your bloodstream with a less dramatic rise in blood sugar than with simple carbohydrates.

Do You Need to Eat Carbohydrates?

Besides carbohydrates being our body's cell's main source of energy, foods rich in carbohydrates are the best source of many nutrients that your body needs, including the majority of the B-vitamins, minerals, such as calcium, phytochemicals (disease fighting substances found in fruits and vegetables), and fiber (which helps protect against colon cancer, heart disease, and diabetes).



What Foods Contain Carbohydrates?

- Fruits
- Vegetables
- Dairy products
- Grains and grain products
- Sugars and Sweets



Do Carbohydrates Cause Weight Gain?

Any food or group of food eaten in excess can lead to weight gain. Carbohydrates are no exception. It's the calories that count in weight management, not a single nutrient. However, some of the higher fiber carbohydrate foods, such as whole grains, fruits, and vegetables, are more filling and thereby help reduce your overall caloric intake.* Complex carbohydrates are digested slower, thus avoiding a sharp rise and fall in blood sugar that can lead to hunger. While more processed carbohydrates, containing simple carbohydrates, such as cakes, cookies, and refined grain products, provide little more than a calorie source without being filling.

* Care should be taken when increasing the fiber content of your diet, as increasing fiber intake too quickly can lead to gastric upset.

Low Carb Foods and Weight Loss

In the 1990's fat was touted as the dietary "bad guy" and all carbs were "good" as long as they were low fat. During the Low Fat Craze, people bought fat-free foods that had the same number of calories and more sugar than the original versions. So, total caloric intake was not reduced. In fact, many people increased their caloric intake because they felt like they could eat more of the reduced fat or fat free items.

Well, here we are in the new millennium and the new food "villain" is carbohydrates. Or is it? The problem with eating low carb foods is essentially the same as eating fat free foods; the calorie count is in not that different than the original versions. Additionally, these foods are generally higher in fat and offer little nutritional value. Low carb donut anyone?

Weight management is not about avoiding one nutrient or another. It's about making healthy lifestyle choices including exercising and eating a variety of foods, in moderation. So, choose a meal or snack that contains protein, carbohydrates, and healthy fat that fills you up and fuels your body.