

Carbohydrates in the Diet

What are carbohydrates?

Carbohydrates, also called carbs, are a source of energy for your body. There are three basic types of carbs: starches, sugars, and dietary fiber.

- Sugar is found in foods such as fruit, milk, soft drinks, baked goods, and candy. Sugars such as glucose and fructose raise blood sugar very quickly.
- Starch is found in plant-based foods such as pasta, bread, cereals, rice, potatoes, beans, and corn. Starches take longer to digest and turn into energy than sugars.
- Fiber is found in whole-grain bread and pasta, beans, peas, leafy vegetables, raisins, prunes, apples, and berries. Dietary fiber is the part of plants that cannot be digested.

You can tell how much carbohydrate is in a food by reading the nutrition facts label.

How much carbohydrate do I need?

Carbohydrates should provide 45 to 60% of your total daily calories. Grains like wheat and rice are high in carbohydrate and part of a healthy, well balanced diet. Try to eat more whole-grain products and fewer processed grains. Also try to avoid eating a lot of food with added sugar. The American Heart Association says that women should get no more than 100 of their daily calories (25 grams of carbohydrate) from added sugar. Men should get no more than 150 calories (37.5 grams of carbohydrate) from added sugar.

How do carbohydrates fit into a weight-loss program?

Eating a very low-carb, high-protein diet may lead to faster weight loss than a balanced diet that includes a variety of carbs. However, very low carb diets often lack important nutrients and fiber, and they can be high in unhealthy fats. These diets can also be hard to follow for a long time.

The healthiest weight loss diets include a variety of foods with a focus on low-calorie, less processed, high-fiber foods with low amounts of saturated fat.

How can I eat the right carbohydrates?

Your body turns carbs into a type of sugar called glucose. Glucose is carried in your blood to all the cells in your body and gives you energy. The glycemic index (GI) is a scale that measures the effect of foods you eat on the level of sugar in your blood. Foods that have a high GI cause your blood sugar level to go up quickly. High GI carb foods include white-bread products, white rice, noodles made with refined flour, French fries, soft drinks, and sugar. Low GI carb foods raise blood sugar more slowly. Examples of low GI carb foods are most beans, whole fruits, whole wheat, oats, bran, brown rice, barley, and whole-grain, low-sugar breakfast cereals.

Many low GI carb foods are also high in fiber. High-fiber carbs are much more filling and a switch to this type of carb may help you eat smaller portions of food, lose weight, and better control your blood sugar.

It is important to choose carefully which carbs you eat. Many processed foods are high in sugars, syrups, or fat, which add a lot of calories and can lead to weight gain and other health problems. Look for less processed, whole-grain, and "no sugar added" carb choices.

Follow these tips to choose healthy carbs and get 20 to 35 grams of fiber in your daily diet:

- At least one half of the grains you eat should come from whole-grain products. For most adults, this equals about 3 to 4 ounces of whole grains each day.
- Most of your fruit servings should come from whole fruit, instead of canned fruit or juice.
- Include a wide variety of vegetables in your diet.
- Include beans and peas several times a week.
- Choose light yogurts with less added sugar.
- Try not to eat a lot of foods with added sugar and saturated fats.

For more information check with:

- The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics
800-366-1655
<http://www.eatright.org>
- Dietary Guidelines for Americans
<http://www.cnpp.usda.gov/dietaryguidelines.htm>

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