

THE LATEST ON CARBS

Nutrition News You Can Use



Learn the facts about carbohydrates and their role in a healthy diet



Our dietitians receive hundreds of questions each year about a wide variety of nutrition topics. Their timely and trustworthy insights and ideas can help you and your family live healthier lives.

What are Carbohydrates?

Carbohydrates or ‘carbs’ are an important part of our diet since they are the body’s primary source of energy. Carbs mainly come from plant foods such as grains, fruits and vegetables. Carbs are also found in dairy products such as milk and yogurt as well as many foods with added sugars like cookies and sweetened beverages.

Where can I find carbs?

Products made from wheat and corn such as bread, crackers, tortillas, cereals and pastas are common carbs. Starchy vegetables like potatoes and lima beans are also mainly carbohydrates. Many fruits, vegetables and dairy products such as oranges, carrots and cottage cheese also contain carbs.

Why are carbohydrates important?

Carbohydrates provide the body with needed calories. Carb containing foods also include other important nutrients like vitamins, minerals and fiber. A healthy diet should include a good balance of lean protein, healthy fats, and nutrient dense carbohydrates.

Are there good carbs and bad carbs?

There are different types of carbs. To understand the differences, it’s helpful to look at two types of carbs that have very different effects on health. Generally speaking, ‘nutrient dense’ carbs are very good for you and should be included frequently in the diet. ‘Empty calorie’ carbs on the other hand do not provide much nutritional value and should be limited. Nutrient dense carbs tend to be minimally processed like whole grain breads and cereals, fruits and vegetables, beans and low fat dairy. These carbs include lots of natural nutrients. Empty calorie carbs

tend to be more processed and to have lots of added sugar and calories. Cakes, cookies and sweetened beverages are examples of this type of carbohydrate. These empty calorie carbs are sometimes described as ‘bad’ carbs. While they are not ‘bad’ as occasional treats, in large quantities they can cause weight gain and health issues.

How do carbs affect your health?

Nutrient dense carbs and empty calorie carbs have very different effects on our bodies. Nutrient dense carbs contain vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants and have positive health benefits. These carbs also tend to be higher in fiber, which slows digestion, helping you to feel fuller longer. Examples of nutrient dense carbs include whole grain breads, cereals and pasta, and a wide variety of fruits, vegetables and beans.

Empty calorie carbs are generally higher in calories with little additional nutritional value and almost no fiber so they get digested more quickly. This rapid digestion causes blood sugar highs and lows that can leave you hungry and tired. This is one reason why lots of empty calorie carbs in your diet can lead you to eat more and gain weight. Empty calorie carbs include sweetened beverages, candy and some desserts.

Many starchy foods fall somewhere in-between nutrient dense and empty calorie carbs. Foods like white potatoes, white rice and white bread contain beneficial nutrients (either naturally or through fortification during processing) but unlike nutrient dense, minimally processed carbs these starchy foods are quickly digested so they cause similar blood sugar highs and lows as empty

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calorie carbs. While these starchy foods can be included as part of a healthy diet, many experts recommend that they shouldn't play a major role.

What's the right amount of carbs?

Experts recommend 45% to 65% of your total calories come from carbs. Most of your carbs should be nutrient dense whole grains and fiber containing fruits and vegetables. For example, a balanced diet that is about 2,000 calories should include at least six servings of grains, five servings of vegetables and four servings of fruit daily.

How can I eat more "good" carbs?

For starters, eat mostly foods that have not been highly processed or refined. For example, choose whole wheat bread or brown rice instead of white and check ingredient labels to make sure that a whole grain is one of the main ingredients. Place fruits and vegetables at the top of your list; whether fresh or frozen, they're good for you.

How can I avoid "bad" carbs?

Be aware of the foods and beverages that contain lots of added sugars and reduce the quantities you eat or drink. These products should be considered treats and eaten in moderation. Ingredient labels can help us to identify added sugar in foods. Many foods include added sugar in the form of syrup, molasses, honey, dextrose or sucrose. For example, many canned fruits are packed in

syrup and some bread varieties are brown in color because of added molasses. So pay attention to ingredient labels and upgrade your carbs to those with less added sugars.

Can carbs be included in a weight management plan?

Nutrient dense carbs can help you to feel fuller longer and eat less. So for effective weight control, nutrient dense carbs are the way to go. A lifestyle that includes regular physical activity, reducing the number of total calories you eat and including a wide variety of nutrient dense foods in your daily meals will help you achieve your goal of better health and long term weight management. Beware of eliminating carbs in the name of weight loss. This leads to the exclusion of too many nutritious foods.

Understanding carb related buzzwords

From 'complex' carbs to 'low glycemic' carbs, carbohydrates are frequently in the news. Most of these buzzwords are used to help people understand which carbs are better-for-you. In every case, better-for-you carbs are minimally processed and nutrient dense like fruits, vegetables and whole grains. Despite the many controversies, the bottom line is that carbs are an important part of a healthy diet. Since all carbs are not created equally, choose your carbs wisely.



Since everyone's health history and nutritional needs are so different, please make sure that you talk with your doctor and a registered dietitian to get advice about the diet and exercise plan that's right for you.