



Are Carbohydrates Healthy or Not? Fact Sheet

You've read books or seen celebrities on TV claiming that carbohydrates are the cause of obesity. Others say carbs are necessary for good health. How do you know who is correct and what you should eat?

What Are Carbohydrates?

Carbohydrates are a large category of foods that includes several different food groups. Something is considered a carbohydrate if it includes nutrients that are eventually broken down and absorbed into the blood as glucose.

This may include food groups such as:

- Fruit
- Vegetables – the ones that contain starch, like beans, peas, corn, potatoes and winter squashes.
- Grains
- Dairy – the ones that contain lactose, like milk and yogurt.

Carbohydrates can also be found in the form of 'simple sugars'. **Simple sugar means that the food is very close to the way that your body would absorb it.** Therefore, it doesn't take much digestion prior to the intestines being able to absorb it.

Examples of simple sugars include:

- Sucrose (table sugar) – this would include white sugar, brown sugar, powdered sugar, etc.
- Honey
- Maple syrup
- Lactose (milk sugar)
- High Fructose Corn Syrup
- Corn syrup
- Agave syrup

Table sugar is actually made of two basic sugars, fructose and glucose, bonded together. When we consume table sugar, our digestive system breaks up the bonds and we absorb the fructose and glucose separately.

Glucose is absorbed into the blood and carried for use by all our cells. Fructose is absorbed as fructose and then converted by the liver into a glucose-like substance that is treated as glucose by the body.

Lactose (or 'milk sugar') is made of glucose and galactose bonded together. Our bodies break up the lactose into glucose and galactose and they are absorbed in the same way. Galactose is converted quickly into glucose after it is absorbed and is then treated as glucose.

Even if you don't provide your body food sources of glucose, your body will make the right amount of glucose for your brain to function. However, this process of making glucose in the context of not eating any carbohydrates causes stress on your body.

Are Carbohydrates Bad for Us?

The short answer is...

NO! CARBOHYDRATES ARE NOT BAD FOR US!

Like simple sugars, complex carbohydrates are also **broken down into the basic sugars before they are absorbed**. However, the digestive process requires more work, and there are many other nutrients that are included with the sugars in a complex carbohydrate. **This includes fiber, vitamins, minerals, phytochemicals and others**. All things that your body needs!

Some examples of **complex carbohydrates** are:

- oats
- wheat (noodles, bread, tortillas)
- quinoa
- rice
- popcorn
- teff
- barley
- corn
- beans
- fruit
- potatoes
- winter squash

You'll notice that these are all whole grains, fruits and starchy vegetables, which is why many people refer these foods "**healthy carbs**".

How Much Carbohydrate Should I Eat?

Glucose is used by cells of our bodies for energy. In fact, the **brain runs most efficiently on glucose** and the body will do whatever it can to ensure adequate glucose for the brain. **Our muscles need glucose too!** Therefore, we should provide it with sources of glucose throughout the day to make sure it has the fuel to function at its best.

Two to three servings of carbohydrate at meals (30-45g) and 1-2 servings at snacks (15-30g) is a good guide. Generally, a serving is:

- ½ cup of cooked grain
- 1 slice of bread
- 1 cup of cut fruit or a piece the size of your fist
- ½ cup to ¾ cup of dry cereal

Consuming carbohydrates with protein and/or fat will help your body digest it slower and therefore cause glucose to rise at a steady rate, rather than at a fast rise.

The Bottom Line

There is no need to eliminate an entire food group! Complex carbohydrates are essential for health and deliver a wide variety of nutrients. Simple carbohydrates should be enjoyed in moderation on special occasions.

Visit <https://bit.ly/healthycarbs> to see Julie's webinar on Carbs: Healthy or Not?

Julie Lanford, MPH, RD, CSO, LDN is a registered dietitian and board certified specialist in oncology nutrition. She currently serves as Wellness Director at Cancer Services, Inc in Winston-Salem and authors a cancer nutrition website at www.cancerdietitian.com. Cancer Services is a United Way partner agency.