



ASK THE DIETITIAN

The Latest on Carbs

Q. I am trying to lose weight; can a low-carb diet be right for me?

A. When you cut back on carbohydrate containing foods you are also reducing overall calories which is why it is possible to lose weight on a low-carb diet. A low-carb diet may be successful in the short-term but it can be hard to keep up with since the majority of the foods we eat are carbs. A better option for you may be to focus on making life-long changes; concentrate on the kinds of food you eat as well as proper portion size. A healthy diet includes a variety of whole grains, vegetables, fruits, lean proteins and beans, as well as low-fat dairy. A balance of these foods along with physical activity can help you achieve weight loss. To help find the right balance for you www.ChooseMyPlate.gov is a good place to start.

Q. Why do people lose weight on the low-carb diets?

A. People lose weight on low-carb diets because not only are they cutting carbs, more importantly they are eating less calories. Foods high in carbs such as cookies, soda, candy, chips, and doughnuts are also high in calories. Eliminating these foods reduces the overall calories, which is the real reason for weight loss. The healthiest way to manage weight in the long-run is to eat a balanced diet with the right amount of calories, limit foods high in added sugar and saturated fat, and to be physically active.

Q. I am thinking about trying a low-carb diet, are there any risks I should be worried about?

A. Carbohydrates play a major role in a healthy diet. Carbs provide many vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients like fiber which are necessary for good health. Carbohydrates also provide energy for the brain, central nervous system, and muscles. Reducing your carbohydrate intake too low can put you at risk of not getting enough nutrients. Limiting foods that are high in added sugar and emphasizing nutrient-dense carbs like whole grains, fruits, vegetables, beans, and low-fat dairy can be a good way to avoid health risks.

Q. I am trying to cut back on sugary foods and my friends told me that I shouldn't eat fruit because it is loaded with sugar, is this true?

A. Eating enough fruit is important in a healthy diet. The naturally occurring sugar found in fruit is called fructose. The difference between eating a piece of fruit and eating a candy bar is that the fruit is low in fat and loaded with vitamins, minerals, and fiber. Since fruits contain fiber, they will not cause a rapid increase in your blood sugar like soda or candy would. Since fruits are low in fat, most are also low in calories. On the other hand, the candy bar is loaded with added sugar, calories, and usually saturated fat and does not provide many other nutrients.

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



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Q. I want to lose weight, is it better to go with a low-carb diet or a low-fat diet?

A. The best diet is one that helps you make lifelong changes. Although it is possible to lose weight on a low-carb diet, it can be hard to stay on it long-term because carbohydrates are in most of the foods we eat. A healthy diet that limits fat is consistent with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans which recommends that 20-35% of your total calories come from fat, while focusing on mono and polyunsaturated and limiting saturated fat. Since a low-fat diet does not eliminate an entire category of food, sticking with it may be easier. Some studies show that although people on low-carb diets initially lose weight faster than people on low-fat diets, weight loss in both groups is about the same after a year. More studies are being done on these diets to determine the effects over longer periods of time. Enjoying foods in moderation and balancing calories with exercise seems to be the key to weight loss.

Q. I have a family history of diabetes, should I avoid carbohydrates?

A. People who eat a lot of foods high in processed carbs such as sodas, white breads, cakes, and cookies are at higher risk for obesity because they tend to eat more calories. Obesity is one of the major risk factors for type II diabetes. To reduce your risk of type 2 diabetes, the American Diabetes Association recommends eating a diet that limits refined carbohydrates, and includes more whole grains and fiber. You can also reduce your risk by maintaining a healthy weight, exercising regularly, not smoking, and keeping your cholesterol and blood pressure at healthy levels. Talk to your doctor and a registered dietitian to get advice about the diet and exercise plan that's right for you.

Q. I am doing my best to eat a well-balanced diet but am unsure of how many carbohydrates I should eat, how much is right for me?

A. Depending on your activity level about 45-65% of your daily calories should come from carbohydrates. If you eat the recommended amounts of grains, vegetables, fruits, beans, and low-fat dairy that are suggested by the Dietary Guidelines for Americans about half of your calories will come from carbohydrates. You should also limit foods like soda, candy, cookies, and cake to avoid carbohydrate that is mainly in the form of added sugar which usually just provides empty calories.

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Q. I have been told to avoid simple carbs and to focus on complex carbs, what is the difference?

A. In general, the difference between simple and complex carbohydrates is how fast they are digested and absorbed by the body. Simple carbohydrates such as soda, candy, and cookies are digested and absorbed quickly causing a rapid rise in blood sugar levels, leaving you hungry and tired after a short period of time. Milk and fruit are considered simple but do not cause a rapid increase in blood sugar which is why experts are beginning to move away from classifying carbs as simple vs. complex. Complex carbohydrates such as whole grain bread and cereal, oatmeal, and some vegetables are high in fiber which slows digestion and absorption leading to smaller increases in blood sugar, providing you with a feeling of fullness and keeping your energy levels stable. Your diet should emphasize a variety of carbohydrate containing foods like whole grains, vegetables, fruits, beans, and low-fat dairy while limiting those that are high in added sugars.

Q. I have been hearing about the glycemic index lately, what exactly is it and why do people use it?

A. The glycemic index (GI) is a way to classify foods based on the effect they have on blood sugar. Low-glycemic foods increase blood sugar levels slower than high-glycemic foods. Foods that are low on the glycemic scale are usually more natural and nutrient dense like whole grains, fruits, vegetables, beans and milk which keep you satisfied and energized for a longer period. High-glycemic foods are typically processed foods such as white bread, corn flakes, white rice, soda, cakes, and cookies which leave you feeling hungry and tired after only a short time. This system is beneficial for people with diabetes who need to closely monitor their blood sugar levels or even athletes who need glucose available immediately for their intense workouts.

Examples of High GI foods

Instant mashed potatoes
Baked white potato
Instant rice
Corn Flakes
Rice Cereal
Bagel, white
Jellybeans
French fries

Examples of Low GI foods

Skim milk
Plain Yogurt
Soy milk
Apple, Orange, Sweet Potato
Oat bran, Bran cereal
Pumpernickel bread
Whole wheat pasta
Lentils, Kidney beans, Chick peas

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Q. I have been avoiding carbohydrates to lose weight but have recently begun to get fatigued very quickly during my workouts, why is this happening?

A. Carbohydrates are the main energy source for the body. Since you are cutting out carbs, your brain, central nervous system, and muscles may not be getting the fuel they need which can lead to fatigue, especially during your workouts. Instead of avoiding all carbs you should consider limiting processed foods like soda, candy, cookies and white bread and include nutrient-dense carbohydrates, like whole grains, fruits, vegetables, beans, and low-fat dairy. These foods may keep you energized during your workouts, and by controlling calories, you can lose weight the healthy way.

Q. I would like to know the difference between good carbs and bad carbs?

A. Some carbohydrates are better for you than others. People usually associate the phrase “good carbs” with foods like whole grains, vegetables, fruits, and low-fat dairy. These foods are better for you because they provide lots of vitamins and minerals needed for good health. There is an association between “bad carbs” and foods like cookies, soda, candy, cakes, and pies because they contain carbohydrate usually in the form of added sugar which provides “empty calories,” and therefore should be limited in the diet.

Q. My doctor said that I need to include more fiber in my diet, how can I get enough?

A. Fiber is important because it is linked to many health benefits such as reducing risk of coronary heart disease, reducing cholesterol, preventing constipation, managing weight, and helping to regulate blood sugar levels. You should aim to get about 25 grams of fiber a day. Good sources of fiber include whole grain breads and cereals, fruits, vegetables, beans, and nuts. For example, an apple, 2/3 cup oatmeal, 1/2 cup Brussels sprouts, 1/2 cup kidney beans, and 1 cup of brown rice all have 3 grams of fiber. Some legumes, such as lentils, can have up to 15 grams of fiber per cup. A few tips to get more fiber in your diet include eating a piece of fruit with every meal, adding beans to soup or salsa, using whole grain or whole wheat products, and even sprinkling flaxseed on cereal, oatmeal, yogurt, or sauces.

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Q. I am training for a marathon; will carb loading help my performance?

A. Since carbohydrates are the preferred source of energy for the body, carb loading may help improve your performance for the race. Improved performance can be achieved because the starches and sugars in carbohydrates are broken down into glucose and used for energy. If you eat large amount of carbohydrates the body will store the extra glucose in the form of glycogen in the liver and muscles for later use. Carb loading is usually done over two to three days before the competition to make sure glycogen stores are maximized. Reducing intensity of training a couple days before your race, and loading glycogen stores can prevent you from getting fatigued too early in your run. According to the Mayo Clinic you should experiment with the amounts of carbohydrates in your diet if you are an endurance athlete. Some may find that carb loading works for them and some are better off with a large pasta dinner the night before an event. Check with a doctor or dietitian to get advice about how many carbohydrates are right for you.

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