



# Carbohydrates

## Carbohydrates: Good or Bad?

There is very good evidence that some carbohydrates or “carbs” are good for our health. But many people are still confused about carbohydrates. This HEART UK factsheet sets out the truth about carbs to help you make a more informed choice.

Very few foods are pure carbohydrate. Most foods are a mix of carbohydrates, fats, proteins, vitamins and minerals. But some foods like rice, pasta, bread and potatoes contain more carbohydrate than protein or fat. We often refer to these as “carbs”.

## What are carbohydrates?

There are three types of carbohydrates: sugar, starch and fibre-rich carbohydrates.

**Sugar** is a very simple carbohydrate. It is found naturally in fruit, honey, fruit juices, milk and vegetables. Sugar tastes nice and so is often added to food and drink. Sweets, chocolates, biscuits, cake and soft drinks contain a lot of sugar. Sugar is digested and enters our blood very quickly.

**Starch** is made from simple sugars joined together. Bread, rice, potatoes and pasta are mainly starch. Our bodies can quickly break up this starch into sugar which then rapidly enters our blood.

**Fibre rich carbs.** Fibre is not a nutrient because we cannot digest it. But it helps keep our bodies healthy. Fibre is naturally found in whole grain carbohydrate foods such as oats, wholemeal bread, brown rice, pearl barley, and also in beans, peas, fruits and vegetables. Fibre can also be added to starchy foods in the form of bran, nuts and seeds.

Fibre rich carbs are good because:

- They have not been heavily processed so they take longer for our body to digest
- They are digested more slowly so help keep blood sugar levels down
- They are more bulky and help us feel fuller for longer
- They contain more vitamins and minerals
- They help us keep to a healthier weight
- They can help keep our gut healthy

## Why eat carbs?

Foods that are rich in carbohydrates are a vital part of our diet. They help to fuel our bodies and can provide essential vitamins and minerals. Most of us eat **too many sugary carbs** and **not enough fibre rich carbs**.

Sugary carbs	Starchy carbs	Fibre rich carbs
<b>Cut down</b>	<b>Limit</b>	<b>Eat more</b>
Sugary drinks, confectionary, jams and syrups, treacle, honey, table sugar.	Potatoes, white bread, white noodles, processed breakfast cereals, white rice and pasta.	Wholegrains such as wholemeal flour, brown rice, wholemeal pasta, breakfast oats, pearl barley and whole wheat breakfast biscuits, fruit, vegetables, lentils, beans.

## Should I cut down on carbs?

About half of the fuel our bodies need should come from carbohydrates. So if you cut down on carbs too much you may end up eating more meat, cheese, butter, cream and other foods which can be expensive and could result in a less healthy diet.

Instead of cutting down on carbs you can achieve a better balance by eating fewer sugary carbs and eating more fibre rich carbs.

## Are low carbohydrate diets the best way to lose weight?

When we put on weight it is because we are eating more calories (energy) than our bodies use up. To lose weight we need to do the opposite – eat fewer calories than our bodies use. We can do this by **limiting what we eat** and by **being more active**.

There are many ways to diet. But to keep your body healthy, as you diet, you need to choose the right balance of foods. This helps to ensure you get all the vital proteins, fats, vitamins, minerals and fibre that you need to keep you well. So it makes sense to avoid foods that have lots of calories but few extra nutrients. We

call these foods "empty calories". Soft drinks, sweets and sugar in your tea and coffee are examples of "empty calories". On the other hand, porridge, wholemeal bread, brown rice and fruit and vegetables are rich in essential nutrients and are good foods to include if you are dieting.

So you don't need to go on a "low carbohydrate diet" to lose weight but you should try to opt for more fibre rich carbs and avoid the sugary ones.

## Why do low carbohydrate diets seem to work?

Low carbohydrate diets are just one approach to weight loss. They work because, like other diets, they limit calorie intake. But that does not mean they are the best way to lose weight. Very low carbohydrate diets often contain too much fat or too few vitamins and minerals and not enough fibre.

## Will cutting down on carbs help me lose weight?

Possibly, but only if you cut down on the right types of carbohydrates. And of course you will need to limit other foods too like meat, cheese, oils and spreads and be active too.

To see if you could benefit - try recording exactly what you eat for a whole week. This will help you to assess what changes you could make. Here are some examples of what you might do:

- Replace some white bread, rice, pasta with whole grain varieties
- Swap your normal breakfast with a whole grain breakfast cereal
- Limit, and if possible cut out, sugary foods and drinks
- Have an extra portion of vegetables or fruit each day

You could also limit calories by

- Keeping portion sizes small
- Eating from a smaller plate
- Having fewer snacks
- Cutting your alcohol intake

## What about carbs and diabetes?

People with diabetes have difficulty in controlling their blood sugar levels. Type 2 diabetes is becoming very common especially in people who gain weight around their waistline as they get older.

Sugary carbs are digested quickly so our blood sugar levels rise fast. Fibre rich carbs release energy more slowly and help keep blood sugar in check. So the best advice for people with diabetes is to eat fewer sugary carbs and more fibre rich carbs.

Having fewer sugary drinks may help prevent or delay type 2 diabetes. This is because in some studies a higher intake of sugar has been linked to a greater risk of becoming a type 2 diabetic.

## Do I need to limit foods that contain natural sugars like milk, plain yoghurt and fruit?

These foods all contain some sugar but experts are less concerned because these foods contain other important nutrients and, in the case of fruit, the sugar is locked up inside the plants' cells.

Fruit juice and smoothies are considered high in sugar and should be limited, just like other sugary drinks.

It's also best to limit milk drinks and fruit yoghurts if extra sugar has been added.