

Carbohydrates have been the mainstay of diets around the world for thousands of years, but recently they've been under attack on the web and in some best-selling diet books, leaving the average person thoroughly confused.

It may help you to think of carbohydrate choices on a continuum, starting with the healthiest, top-quality choices and progressing to less healthy choices. Make more of your carb choices from the beginning of this list than from the end, and you'll be eating well.



FRUITS, VEGETABLES AND LEGUMES

You can't go wrong with fruits, vegetables, and legumes (beans), all-stars that deliver lots of vitamins, minerals and fiber for relatively few calories. As Dr. David Katz says, "You find me one person who can legitimately blame their obesity or diabetes on apples or carrots, and I will give up my day job and become a hula dancer."



INTACT WHOLE GRAINS

Running neck-in-neck with fruits and vegetables are intact whole grains. Like fruits and veggies, intact whole grains are powerhouses of nutrition. But keep portions moderate; they have less water, so they're a more concentrated carb. Best choice of all? Eat your intact whole grains with lots of vegetables, as in the quinoa bowl shown here.



LIGHTLY PROCESSED GRAINS

Sometimes intact whole grains are very lightly processed, as when oats are steamed and rolled to make rolled oats, or grains are crushed, mixed with water and extruded to make whole grain pasta. These are also good choices. Little-known fact: Flour and water made into pasta digests much more slowly than if the same flour and water were made into bread. That makes pasta a healthier choice for controlling blood sugar swings.



WHOLE GRAIN FOODS

Grains count as "whole" whenever all of their original bran, germ, and endosperm are still present—even if the grains have been made into breads, crackers and cereals. Look for whole grain foods made without extra ingredients—just good whole grains, without added sugar.



REFINED GRAINS

When whole grains aren't available and white bread or other refined grains are the only choice, pay special attention to what you're eating with your grains, making sure to add lots of vegetables, beans, fish and other healthy "partners." Tip: true sourdough breads are less likely to spike blood sugar than yeast breads.



TREATS AND DESSERTS

Grain foods high in sugar and extra fats are meant to be eaten rarely—at most a few times a week, not every day. While most whole grain versions are marginally healthier than their refined counterparts, a whole grain cookie is still a cookie, so save these treats for special occasions.