



Food and Nutrition Myths: Carbohydrates

Myth: I should avoid all carbohydrates, especially if I want to lose weight

Answer: Carbohydrates are essential; it's their quality that matters.

Carbohydrates provide essential energy that our bodies need to function. However, because “carbohydrates” include everything from fruits, vegetables, legumes/beans and whole grains to cakes, cookies, pies and soda, it's the quality of the carbs we eat that matters.

What do “good carbs” have in common?

- They're “nutrient dense” which means they provide a high level of useful nutrients with relatively few calories.
- They have plenty of fiber. Fiber, which is found only in plant foods, provides a host of benefits: it aids digestion and helps prevent constipation; helps protect our bodies against chronic conditions such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes; can help lower LDL (bad) cholesterol; and can make us feel fuller longer. Beans, whole grains, fruits, vegetables and nuts are all great sources of fiber.
- They're minimally processed. Apples are healthier than apple juice. Brown rice is healthier than white rice. Look for foods you can eat as close to their whole natural form as possible.

What do “not-so-good/refined carbs” have in common?

- They're lower in nutrients. Refined wheat has only about 1/3 of the nutrients found in whole wheat. Blueberry pie doesn't offer anything like the benefits of a dish of blueberries. Soda has plenty of calories, without a single vitamin, mineral or other nutrient.
- Their fiber is missing. A glass of orange juice has just 1/5 the fiber of an actual orange. There's no fiber in a strip of raspberry “fruit leather” – but there are 8 grams in a cup of actual raspberries. Most cookies, cakes and pies have little or no fiber.
- They're highly processed. Ideally, we want the foods we eat to supply us with a slow, steady source of fuel. It takes a while for our bodies to break down whole foods – like good carbs – but foods that have already been broken down in a factory are digested quickly, sending our blood sugar on a roller coaster ride and leaving us hungry in no time.
- They're often high in sugar. A 20-ounce soda contains the equivalent of about 16 teaspoons of sugar. All you're getting is calories, without any of the nutrients your body needs to function properly and avoid disease.

Bottom Line

When it comes to good health, or if you're looking to lose a few pounds, avoiding all carbs is not the way to go. Rather, eat a balanced diet in moderation and include a spectrum of whole foods including plenty of vegetables, fruits, whole grains, dairy, eggs, nuts and legumes so you know you're getting essential nutrients and vitamins. And when you reach for a food package, check the ingredient list and pass on those with added sugar.

Eat This:

- Vegetables
- Fruits
- Whole grains, especially intact grains such as oats, barley, brown rice, farro
- Beans and legumes

Not That:

- Refined grains and white bread
- Commercial baked goods
- Cereals without whole grains or fiber
- Sodas
- Candy