

# WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT PASTA AND HEALTH

Pasta is a staple in the Mediterranean Diet, and an ancient food that has been nourishing, sustaining and captivating the people in the Mediterranean region as well as people all over the world for hundreds of years. Described below are some of the many ways pasta can be part of a healthy diet. For more information please visit [Sharethepasta.org](http://Sharethepasta.org) and [OldwaysPT.org](http://OldwaysPT.org).

## Pasta and Diabetes

According to the American Diabetes Association there is no evidence to suggest that people with diabetes need to avoid any carbs, including pasta. Like other foods, **portion size is a key factor** when considering eating pasta dishes, along with managing your eating plan.<sup>3,4</sup>

Calories vary depending on the type of pasta. One half cup of cooked pasta ranges from 85 to 120 calories, and contains about a half a gram of fat and less than 5 milligrams of sodium (if cooked without salt). Pasta pairs perfectly with plenty of high-fiber high-fiber, heart-healthy vegetables and legumes. and legumes.<sup>5</sup>

## Pasta and Heart Disease

The American Heart Association recommends following a Mediterranean-style diet to help prevent heart disease and stroke and reduce risk factors such as obesity, diabetes, high cholesterol and high blood pressure.<sup>6,7,8,9</sup>

Pasta is a key component of the Mediterranean Diet and can be found in a wide variety of dishes like Ligurian pesto pasta, Campanian pasta e fagioli and Greek pastitsio.



## DEFINITIONS

**Glycemic index (GI)** – rates foods on a scale of 1-100 according to how quickly the food raises your blood sugar level. Ideally you want foods on the low side which will keep your blood sugar levels more stable and avoid spikes. While low GI foods are especially important for people with diabetes, everyone can benefit from a low GI diet. Pasta has a glycemic index of approximately 50 to 55.<sup>1</sup>  
High GI foods rate 70 or higher  
Medium 69-55  
Low 55 or below

**Resistant Starch** – Resistant starches are similar to fiber in that they pass through the small intestines undigested, but later are broken down by the gut bacteria in the large intestine. They provide numerous benefits and have fewer calories than regular starch.<sup>2</sup>

**Al dente** – cooked to the tooth, means cooking pasta until chewy but not soft.





## Pasta and Digestion/Blood Sugar Levels

● **Pasta has a low glycemic index (GI).** *With a glycemic index of 55 or less pasta is considered a low glycemic index food.* Foods that are considered to have a low glycemic index are slowly absorbed, digested and metabolized resulting in a slower and lower rise in blood sugar levels and ultimately insulin levels.<sup>1</sup>

The International Carbohydrate Quality Consortium's scientific consensus statement on glycemic index, load and response, as reported in a 2015 peer-reviewed article, concluded that diets low in GI are relevant to the prevention and management of diabetes and coronary heart disease, and probably obesity.<sup>1</sup>

● **Cooked and cooled pasta contains resistant starch.** Pasta that is pre-prepared such as baked macaroni or lasagna, eaten as leftovers, or eaten cold like in pasta salads contains resistant starch. Resistant starch can help contribute to the sensation of fullness, and since it resists digestion, it can also help improve insulin sensitivity and may even help you feel full longer.<sup>10 11 12</sup>

● **Cook pasta al dente.** Cooking pasta al dente ensures that the pasta will have a lower glycemic index than if cooked until soft and mushy.<sup>11 12 13</sup>

● **Add some acid.** Studies show the addition of a small amount of lemon juice or vinegar in pasta dishes, such as in a pasta salad, can inhibit starch breakdown and slow carbohydrate digestion.<sup>14 15</sup>



## Pasta and Obesity

Several studies show pasta consumption is not associated with weight gain and obesity. In fact, some studies suggest pasta eaters may weigh less than non-pasta eaters, particularly in women.<sup>16 17 18 19</sup>

Pasta is a great vehicle for increasing vegetable intake. Research shows pasta eaters have higher intakes of vegetables, particularly red vegetables than non-pasta eaters.<sup>16</sup>



## Why does pasta have a low GI?

Mostly because the way it is made. When pasta is made, the flour combines with water and this produces a gelatinized starch granule in a sponge-like network of protein. The extrusion process then creates a protein shield around the starch granule. It is this unique starch-protein structure that allows the carbohydrate to be digested more slowly than other types of refined carbs like bread and cereal. If the pasta is dried this strengthens the protein shield even more.<sup>13 20</sup>







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