

The Food Pyramid and Healthy Eating Tips From Harvard

The Nutrition Source

Carbohydrates: Good Carbs Guide the Way

Introduction

Don't be misled by the blanket pronouncements on the dangers of carbohydrates. They are an important part of a healthy diet. Carbohydrates provide the body with the fuel it needs for physical activity and for proper organ function. The best sources of carbohydrates—fruits, vegetables, and whole grains—deliver essential vitamins and minerals, fiber, and a host of important phytonutrients.

What Are Carbohydrates?

Carbohydrates are found in a wide array of foods—bread, beans, milk, popcorn, potatoes, cookies, spaghetti, soft drinks, corn, and cherry pie. They also come in a variety of forms. The most common and abundant forms are sugars, fibers, and starches.

The basic building block of every carbohydrate is a sugar molecule, a simple union of carbon, hydrogen, and oxygen. Starches and fibers are essentially chains of sugar molecules. Some contain hundreds of sugars. Some chains are straight, others branch wildly.

Carbohydrates were once grouped into two main categories. Simple carbohydrates included sugars such as fruit sugar (fructose), corn or grape sugar (dextrose or glucose), and table sugar (sucrose). Complex carbohydrates included everything made of three or more linked sugars. Complex carbohydrates were thought to be the healthiest to eat, while simple carbohydrates weren't so great. It turns out that the picture is more complicated than that.

The digestive system handles all carbohydrates in much the same way—it breaks them down (or tries to break them down) into single sugar molecules, since only these are small enough to cross into the bloodstream. It also converts most digestible carbohydrates into glucose (also known as blood sugar), because cells are designed to use this as a universal energy source.

Fiber

Fiber is an exception. It is put together in such a way that it can't be broken down into sugar molecules, and so it passes through the body undigested. Fiber comes in two varieties: soluble fiber dissolves in water, while insoluble fiber does not. Although neither type nourishes the body, they promote health in many ways. Soluble fiber binds to fatty substances in the intestines and carries them out as a waste, thus lowering low-density lipoprotein (LDL, or bad cholesterol). It also helps regulate the body's use of sugars, helping

to keep hunger and blood sugar in check. Insoluble fiber helps push food through the intestinal tract, promoting regularity and helping prevent constipation

Good Carbohydrates

For optimal health, get your grains intact from foods such as whole wheat bread, brown rice, whole grain pasta, and other possibly unfamiliar grains like quinoa, whole oats, and bulgur. Not only will these foods help protect you against a range of chronic diseases, they can also please your palate and your eyes.

Here are some suggestions for adding more good carbohydrates to your diet:

- **Start the day with whole grains.** If you're partial to hot cereals, try old-fashioned or steel-cut oats. If you're a cold cereal person, look for one that lists whole wheat, whole oats, or other whole grain first on the ingredient list.
- **Use whole grain breads for lunch or snacks.** Check the label to make sure that whole wheat or another whole grain is the first ingredient listed.
- **Bag the potatoes.** Instead, try brown rice or even "newer" grains like bulgur, wheat berries, millet, or hulled barley with your dinner.
- **Pick up some whole wheat pasta.** If the whole grain products are too chewy for you, look for those that are made with half whole-wheat flour and half white flour.
- **Bring on the beans.** Beans are an excellent source of slowly digested carbohydrates as well as a great source of protein

VEGETABLES

Choose more vegetables and fruits. Go for color and variety—dark green, yellow, orange, and red.



It's hard to argue with the health benefits of a diet rich in vegetables and fruits: [Lower blood pressure](#); reduced risk of [heart disease](#), stroke, and probably some [cancers](#); lower risk of [eye](#) and [digestive problems](#); and a mellowing effect on blood sugar that can help keep appetite in check.

Most people should aim for at least nine servings (at least 4½ cups) of vegetables and fruits a day, and potatoes don't count. Go for a variety of kinds and colors of produce, to give your body the mix of nutrients it needs. Best bets? Dark leafy greens, cooked tomatoes, and anything that's a rich yellow, orange, or red color.

Proteins Pay attention to the protein package. Fish, poultry, and beans are your best bets.



Animal protein and vegetable protein probably have the same effects on health. It's the protein package that's likely to make a difference. A 6-ounce broiled porterhouse steak is a great source of protein—38 grams

worth. But it also delivers 44 grams of fat, 16 of them saturated. That's almost three-fourths of the recommended daily intake for [saturated fat](#). The same amount of salmon gives you 34 grams of protein and 18 grams of fat, 4 of them saturated. A cup of cooked lentils has 18 grams of protein, but under 1 gram of fat.

So when choosing protein-rich foods, pay attention to what comes along with the protein. Vegetable sources of protein, such as beans, nuts, and whole grains, are excellent choices, and they offer healthy [fiber](#), vitamins and minerals. The best animal protein choices are fish and poultry. If you are partial to red meat, stick with the leanest cuts, choose moderate portion sizes, and make it only an occasional part of your diet.

FATS

Choose healthy fats, limit saturated fat, and avoid trans fat.



The total amount of fat you eat, whether high or low, isn't really linked with disease. What really matters is the *type of fat* you eat.

The "bad" fats—saturated and trans fats—increase the risk for certain diseases. The "good" fats—monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats—lower disease risk. The key to a healthy diet is to substitute good fats for bad fats—and to avoid trans fats.

Although it is still important to limit the amount of cholesterol you eat, especially if you have diabetes, dietary cholesterol isn't nearly the villain it's been portrayed to be. Cholesterol in the bloodstream is what's most important. And the biggest influence on blood cholesterol level is the mix of fats in your diet—not the amount of cholesterol you eat from food.

Tips for Choosing Healthy Fats

- 1. Use liquid plant oils for cooking and baking.** Olive, canola, and other plant-based oils are rich in heart-healthy unsaturated fats. Try dressing up a salad or spring vegetables with a delicious, olive oil-based vinaigrette, such as this recipe for [fresh mint vinaigrette](#).
- 2. Ditch the trans fat.** In the supermarket, read the label to find foods that are trans free. In restaurants, steer clear of fried foods, biscuits, and other baked goods, unless you know that the restaurant has eliminated trans fat. Read more about [how to spot trans fats](#)—and how to avoid them.
- 3. Switch from butter to soft tub margarine.** Choose a product that has zero grams of trans fat, and scan the ingredient list to make sure it does not contain partially hydrogenated oils.
- 4. Eat at least one good source of omega-3 fats each day.** Fatty fish, walnuts, and canola oil all provide omega-3 fatty acids. Read more about [omega-3 fatty acids](#) and why they are so important to good health.

5. Go lean on meat and milk. Beef, pork, lamb, and dairy products are high in saturated fat. Choose low-fat milk, and savor full-fat cheeses in small amounts; also, choose lean cuts of meat.

Healthy Drinks

Water is best to quench your thirst. Skip the sugary drinks, and go easy on the milk and juice.



There are many options for what to drink, but without a doubt, water is the best choice: It's calorie-free, and it's as easy to find as the nearest tap.

Drinks that are loaded with sugar are the worst choice: They provide lots of calories and virtually no other nutrients. Drinking them routinely can lead to weight gain and increase the risk of type 2 diabetes.

Healthy Weight

Move more, eat less. Turning off the television and skipping the sugary drinks can help.



Weight is a tough issue. Most people know how important it is to keep weight in check yet struggle to do so. And it's understandable in today's world where calorie-packed food comes fast and easy. But, the health benefits of staying at a healthy weight are huge and well worth the effort.

In addition to lowering the risk of heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and high blood pressure, keeping weight in check can also lower the risk of many different cancers, including breast, colon, kidney, pancreas, and esophagus.

Because most people put on a pound or two every year, the first, and easiest, goal should be to stop any more weight gain, which has big health benefits itself. After that, getting weight down to a healthy level should be the next step. Quick weight control tips? Get active, choose smaller portions, and eat more s-l-o-w-l-y.

<http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/index.html>