



# Crazy About Carbs?

By Dr. Tricia Talerico, D.C., M.S., Nutr.

Carbohydrates (carbs) often get a bad rap, especially when it comes to gaining weight. However, carbs aren't all bad. They have many health benefits and so have a rightful place in our diet. As a matter of fact, the body actually "needs" carbs as a primary source of energy. That being said, some carbs can be better for you than others. Conversely, the body can function without carbs. This metabolic adaptation is called **ketosis** and occurs where there are extremely low amounts of carbohydrates in the diet for extended periods of time.

Carbohydrates are one of the three energy-yielding nutrients known as **macronutrients**. The other two are fats and proteins (previously discussed in my last two articles). The human body can easily break down, absorb and metabolize carbs for energy. In fact, carbs are the body's primary source of energy – it will prioritize burning carbs first (over fats and proteins) if it's available. During digestion, sugars and starches (carbs) are broken down into simple sugars. These simple sugars are then absorbed into the bloodstream where they are known as blood sugar or blood glucose. The body's response to blood glucose is for the pancreas to produce insulin. Insulin helps the glucose to enter the cells where it is used for energy. Extra glucose, not used immediately by the cells is stored in the liver or muscles or can be converted to fat.

There are three main sub-groups of carbs: sugars, starches and fibers. They are all

naturally occurring and originate in plant-based foods. **Sugar** is the simplest form of carbohydrate. It occurs naturally in some foods, including fruits, vegetables and milk. Types of sugar include **fructose** or fruit sugar, **sucrose** or table sugar and **lactose** or milk sugar. Starch is a complex carb (multiple sugar units). **Starch** occurs naturally in vegetables, grains, cooked dry beans and peas. **Fiber** is also a complex carb and occurs naturally in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, cooked dry beans and peas.

So, we understand that carbs are important for long-term health, but many carbohydrate-rich foods are not healthy. So, choosing your carbs wisely is essential but not easy. This is why it is important to think about the **quality** and **quantity** of carbohydrate-rich foods that you consume each day. Whole foods such as fruits, vegetables, whole-grains, legumes, nuts and seeds are all carb and nutrient-rich foods. As

for quantity, this is why understanding a healthy portion size is important. Because we spend a good portion of our days sitting and not being active, we can easily consume more energy (calories) than our body needs. Excess carb intake places a large metabolic load on the body and ultimately leads to weight gain, poor metabolic health and an increased risk of heart disease. Generally, I recommend that carb-rich foods like brown rice, sweet potato, quinoa, pasta, lentils, etc. be consumed in ½ cup servings or approximately ¼ of your plate. Most importantly, limit foods with added sugars and refined grains, such as sugary drinks, desserts and candy. These are high in calories but low in nutrition.

Wishing all of you a very happy, healthy and safe holiday season from all of us at Nutrition and Weight Loss Center of Ocean.

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