

Carbs - What I Need to Know

When it comes to carbohydrate, the most important thing to consider is the AMOUNT you eat. Carbohydrate is the only nutrient that directly increases blood glucose and insulin levels, so how much of it you have can have a big impact on your health.

The only thing we use carbs for in the body is energy, though carb-containing foods sometimes contain fibre or other vitamins and minerals that can be health promoting.

Most people think we NEED to eat carbs, but this is not true. Although the brain does use some glucose, if we don't eat any carbs our body can make its own out of fats or proteins.

We should only have 5 to 7 grams of glucose in our blood at any one time. This is equivalent to approximately 1 to 2 teaspoons of glucose. Our body can easily meet this need without us eating any carbohydrate. We can get all the fibre and any other vitamins and minerals we need from other food sources too.

So, if reducing your carb intake helps you to achieve your health goals there is no reason to avoid doing this. In fact, this has been shown to be a safe and effective way to improve diabetes management for many people.

It is important to remember that foods which belong in other food groups can still include carbohydrate. For example:



Fruit and Veg: Fruits contain natural fruit sugars, whilst vegetables contain varying amounts of starchy carbs.



Proteins: Most protein foods are carb free, although some protein sources (e.g., pulses, beans and nuts) do contain starchy carbs.

Ultra-processed foods containing protein can be high in carbs, such as sausages or burgers with a low meat content and products that are battered or in breadcrumbs.



Fats: Most fats are virtually carb free in their natural form. However, ultra-processed foods (such as biscuits, cakes, chips, crisps or chocolate) have a high carb content as they combine fat with things such as sugar, flour or potatoes.

Dairy products are an exception to this, as they often contain natural milk sugars. Hard cheeses such as cheddar are virtually carb free though.

Once you are happy with the AMOUNT of carbohydrate you are having, you should then consider the TYPE of carbohydrate you are having. Swapping quicker-releasing carbohydrates (which have a higher glycaemic index, or GI) for slower-releasing (lower GI) foods may have additional benefits, for example.

In practice this usually means minimising or avoiding refined carbohydrates, like those found in most breads and breakfast cereals, and choosing minimally processed options like wholegrains, nuts, or pulses instead.

Being aware of how much carbohydrate different foods and drinks contains can help you make informed choices. Resources such as the [Carbs and Cals](#) books and App, or the sugar infographics at www.phcuk.org/resources, can help with this.

This topic is explored further on X-PERT programmes and in X-PERT Handbooks.
For more information, visit www.xperthealth.org.uk.

Examples of Carbohydrate-Containing Foods



Breakfast.



Cereal.



Bread.



Crumpets.



Fruit.



Yoghurt.



Jam & marmalade.

Lunch and Evening Meal.



Bread, chapati & naan.



Potato.



Takeaways & ready meals.



Pie.



Chips.



Pasta & sauce.



Rice.



Pulses.



Battered chicken or fish.

Plus small amounts of carbohydrate in salad and vegetables

Drinks.



Juice.



Milk.



Sugar in drinks.



Fizzy drinks.



Malted drinks.



Alcoholic drinks.

Snacks and Desserts.



Biscuits & scones.



Fruit.



Ice cream.



Cakes & muffins.



Sweets.



Puddings & custards.



Nuts.



Crisps.



Chocolate.