

What is it?

A low carb dietary approach restricts how much carbohydrate is eaten. “Low” is classed as having less than 130g carbohydrate every day. Many people see benefits simply by avoiding starchy and sugary carbs though, without having to track exactly how much carbohydrate they are having.

The guideline in the Nutrition for Health model (see below) is for people to have between 0 and 4 portions of carbohydrate per day, though they may still get some carbs from other foods, such as fruit and vegetables. People have different tolerances for carbohydrate, and this will affect how many portions are right for them.

As less carbohydrate is eaten, people get most of their energy from fat and protein. People often fear fat, but when it comes from minimally processed, natural products it is not bad for us. See the Nutrition for Health model below for portion recommendations. The specific number of portions someone should have (within the recommended ranges) depends on their needs and goals. If weight loss is the goal fewer portions of fat should be eaten, to allow the body to use some of its own stored fat for energy.

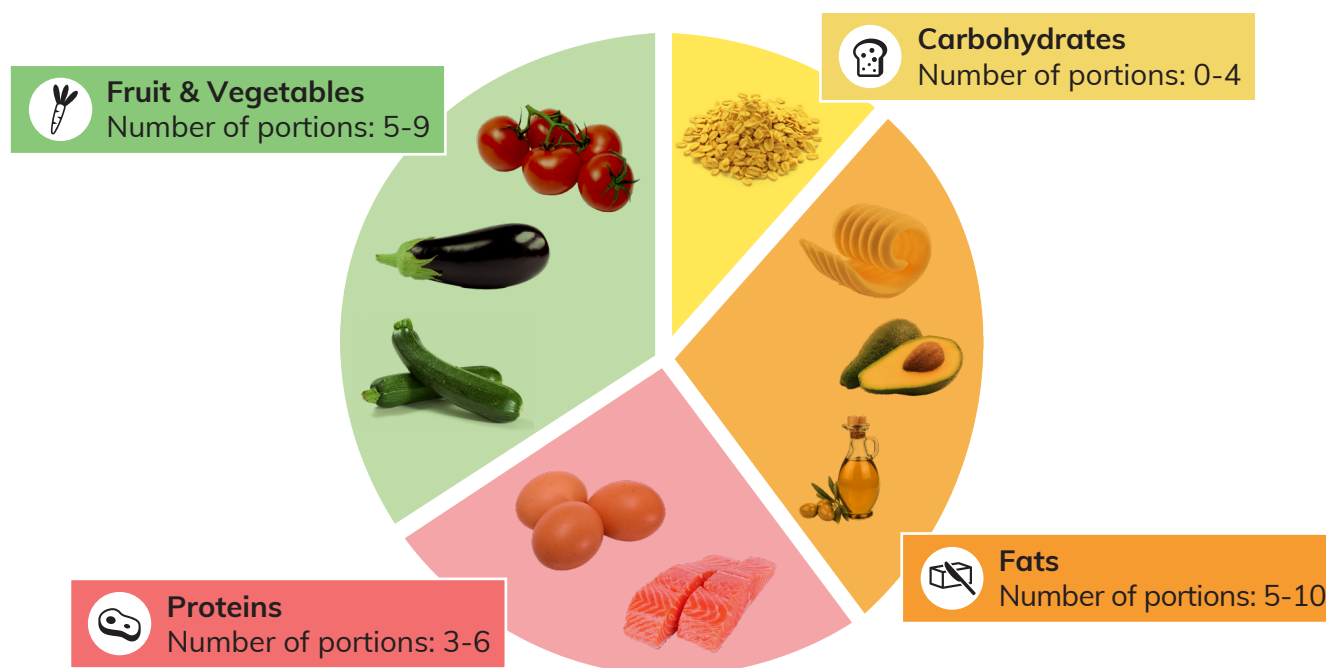
Changing opinions

You don't have to go back many years to find a time when this approach was not widely promoted. However, growing evidence that it can be effective for many people has helped to change opinions.

Low carb approaches are particularly well accepted as a suitable choice for people with type 2 diabetes, and are now included in a number of key guidelines around the world (including in the UK). The benefits of this way of eating can be seen beyond this population though.

It is now widely agreed that diets should be individualised to help people meet their own goals, taking into account their needs and preferences.

The following would all be classed as one portion of carbohydrate: 2-4 tsp breakfast cereal (20-40g); 1 slice of bread (40g); 1/2 a roti (30g), 1/2 a chapati (40g) or 1/4 of a naan (35g); 100g pulses or beans (cooked weight); 1-2 tbsp rice or pasta (40-50g cooked); 80g quinoa or 100g bulgur wheat (cooked); 3 boiled potatoes, 1 small baked potato (90g) or 100g mashed potato.



What are the benefits?



Avoiding foods with a high carb content means removing many of the ultra-processed foods people often have too much of (e.g., cakes, crisps and biscuits). It also means that refined carbohydrates which provide little nutritional benefit (such as white bread and many breakfast cereals) are cut out.

As carbohydrate is the only nutrient that directly affects blood glucose levels, this dietary approach can quickly help to improve diabetes management and to reduce the need for diabetes medication(s).

What are the negatives?



This approach is usually very different from peoples' current style of eating, and food packaging, cafés and restaurants still tend to support a low fat approach. This means people often need additional knowledge and support when first adopting a low carb dietary approach.

Some people experience side effects when they first experiment with a low carb approach, though these can usually be avoided by drinking enough fluids and adding salt to food. People also need to challenge any fat phobia, as restricting carbs and not replacing them with some healthy fats may lead to hunger. Some people go too far the other way though, and add excessive amounts of fat to what they are eating or drinking, in the form of butter or cream for example. This will not help weight loss attempts, so it is important to be mindful of portions sizes and recommendations.



If you take any medication to help manage your diabetes and/or blood pressure you should discuss any plans to reduce your carbohydrate intake with your healthcare team BEFORE you make any big changes.

What foods are usually included?

Low carb foods have less than 10g carbs per 100g, though it is important to consider overall nutritional quality when deciding if something is a good option.

When carbohydrate is restricted it is important that it is replaced with protein and/or fat, to make sure you get enough energy and nutrients.

Foods such as eggs, avocados, nuts, full fat dairy products (e.g., milk, cheese and yoghurt), oily fish, white fish, chicken, red meat and extra-virgin olive oil are all good options when following this dietary approach. Extra-virgin olive is also suitable for cooking with.

You should aim to have 5 to 9 portions of fruit and vegetables every day, as they provide important vitamins and minerals, as well as fibre. Green leafy vegetables are good options, and berries tend to contain less carbs than other fruits.

You should avoid sugary foods and drinks (including fruit juices), refined carbs, and ultra-processed foods (these tend to have a long ingredients list).

A low carb dietary approach can be a good way to improve blood glucose control, weight management and general health. It can also help people reduce their need for diabetes medication, and can even help some people to achieve remission of type 2 diabetes. So, if this is an approach that meets your needs and preferences, it can be a good option to help you manage your health.

If you would like more information, the X-PERT Low Carb Living Handbook is available from our online shop, at www.xperthealth.org.uk/shop.