

Quinn on Nutrition: Simple and complex facts about carbs

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Are carbohydrates good or bad? This is a trick question. That's because there are many types of carbs, and they all have differing effects on our health.

So what is a carbohydrate? Many clients think "bread" when I ask this question. They are often surprised that fruit and milk also contain natural carbohydrates. Vegetables are also a source of carbs, both in the form of natural starches as well as dietary fiber.

Carbohydrates can be simple or complex. They can be in the form of sugar, starch or fiber. And their fibers can be soluble or insoluble.

I was drawn, then, to a review on this topic by medical experts that recently appeared in the journal *Atherosclerosis*. Besides that carbohydrates are the cleanest, most efficient fuel for our brains, muscles and nerves, here are some other truths about this group of foods.

— Carbs such as whole grains and dietary fiber are good for keeping blood sugar, cholesterol, [blood pressure](#) and weight in healthy ranges.

— More refined carbs such as sugar and low fiber snacks have the opposite effect on our health when we overindulge. We therefore need to eat smaller amounts of sugar cookies and candy canes. Darn.

— More healthful carbs supply dietary fiber—a type of carb that the body does not digest (so no calories!) and has other benefits. Foods that contain [dietary fiber](#) include whole fruits, vegetables, [whole grains](#), nuts and legumes. High consumers of high-fiber foods show consistently lower incidents of heart disease, diabetes and colon cancer, to name a few.

Some dietary fibers called "probiotics" are fermented by good bacteria in our guts. Is this good? You bet. Beneficial effects of this process include better blood sugar control, reduced appetite to keep us from overindulging on Christmas cookies and protection from disease-producing inflammation.

Does a high-carb diet make you fat? That's still up for debate and again, the type of carbs we eat make a difference. Studies do show, however, that, given unlimited access to sugary foods or sweetened beverages, many of us will put on extra pounds.

What does this mean in the real world? Check your plate. Each meal deserves a serving or two of vegetable, fruit or legume. Slice tomatoes or add salsa to your morning eggs. Open that bag of baby carrots to crunch along with your sandwich. Add a festive dose of green/red/orange veggies to your meat and potatoes. Nibble on nuts or popcorn at the next party. Along with celebratory sips of eggnog and champagne, enjoy a myriad of flavors of sugar-free waters. Bake candy cane cookies with your grandkids without feeling obligated to eat a dozen. And savor every bite of this holiday season!

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