

# What's The Big Deal About Carbs?

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It must be said at the outset that carbohydrates are delicious. Every Western comfort food is made of carbohydrates. We love them. So why do they receive such constantly bad press? This is best answered by looking at the different sorts of carbohydrates and how the body breaks them down and uses them.

All carbohydrates break down to glucose, our most basic unit of energy, but each different type of carbohydrate breaks down at a different rate in the body. Carbohydrates fall into two broad categories: simple and complex.

Simple carbohydrates include all foods containing moderate to high amounts of sugar and refined or processed foods. This means soft drinks, white flour, white pasta, white rice, packaged bakery goods, biscuits, sugar itself and any other foods which have been heavily processed.

**Simple carbs** break down very quickly and so flood our body with glucose, making our blood sugar spike sharply. As a result, our pancreas is put under stress and needs to quickly secrete the hormone insulin to lower our blood sugar. If we constantly eat simple carbohydrates, our pancreas begins to strain, our insulin levels fall and the hormone is not as effective as it once was. This is when we risk developing Type II diabetes.

**Complex carbohydrates** include foods that have been through little or no processing. Examples are wholegrains such as oats, brown rice, pasta, wholemeal bread and flour, all vegetables (except potatoes) and many fruits. Complex carbohydrates are more complex in their chemical structure and so take longer for our digestive system to break them down. They have been proven to keep blood sugar more stable, aid weight loss, increase sensitivity to insulin, reduce the risk of heart disease, lower blood cholesterol levels and keep us feeling fuller for longer. That all sounds great, but there is one more aspect of carbohydrates which has seen it become a dirty word on the diet circuit.

Our bodies use carbohydrates for energy. This energy powers our brain, our metabolic processes and our muscles. If we eat more carbohydrates than we need, our body stores them as fat. Unfortunately most of us eat too many of those delicious little carbs, don't do enough exercise to burn them and so store them as fat.

So the bottom line on carbs is this: they play a vital role in our diet but focus on the complex carbohydrates, don't overdo it and, if you do, burn the extra carbs off with some appropriate exercise so that they don't go into 'storage'.

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