

## To Eat Carbohydrates or Not to Eat Carbohydrates

By: Laura Burk MPH, R.D., L.D.

Carbohydrates are important because they are the main energy source for the body at or above 70% of aerobic capacity, the intensity at which most people train and compete. Carbohydrates also fuel the body cells for simple activities such as breathing, walking, and burning fat.

Through digestion, a carbohydrate is broken down into glucose for immediate energy or stored in the muscles as glycogen. Consuming carbohydrates an hour before exercise can improve performance by using immediate glucose within the body. Carbohydrate consumption 3 to 4 hours before exercise also enhance performance by "topping off" glycogen stores. During a workout lasting longer than an hour, carbohydrates increases endurance by providing glucose for your muscles when they're running low on glycogen. Finally, taking in carbohydrate immediate following several hours of hard training increases muscle glycogen storage. The body only converts carbohydrates to fat when you consume more calories than the body needs

Fat only becomes available for fuel after about 20 minutes of exercise, and most people don't work out long enough to directly burn significant amounts of fat during a workout. But regular exercise can create a calorie deficit that promotes gradual fat loss long term. Further, aerobic exercise raises the level of several hormones that promote greater fat use. Therefore, the best way to crank up your body's fat-burning ability is to keep working out.

Carbohydrates are not created equal. There are two types of carbohydrates: complex carbohydrates and simple carbohydrates. Most Complex carbohydrates (whole grains and vegetables) are loaded with vitamins, minerals, and fiber. Simple carbohydrates (sugar and starches) are known as high glycemic index carbohydrates. Basically that means these carbohydrates absorbed quickly into the blood causing a spike of blood sugar and a surge of insulin. Insulin isn't a harmful hormone. It's essential for the transfer of glucose (blood sugar) from the bloodstream to the body's cells, where it fuels all activities. Weight loss is not solely dependant on carbohydrates and insulin. Consuming a high percentage of calories from carbohydrate doesn't make an individual overweight. Weight depends only on calories input relative to calorie expenditure.

High-protein, low-carbohydrate diets are not magic regimens--they're just very low-calorie. Weight loss on these diets occurs because of the severe caloric restriction, not because of protein versus carbohydrate. Due to the rapid weight loss and carbohydrate restriction, the body's muscle, performance, and well-being may be jeopardized. Active people and athletes require dietary carbohydrate to maintain their muscle-stored glycogen, the predominant fuel for exercise.

**Conclusion:** The truth is that people are eating more total calories and getting less physical activity causing weight gain. Waistlines are expanding from larger portion sizes and low fat food products. Cutting back on dietary fat does reduce total calories more than cutting back on carbohydrate, because fat supplies more than twice the calories. In addition, fat is more likely to be stored as body fat than a carbohydrate. However, a person who cuts back on fat calories but replaces them with carbohydrate calories is not going to lose weight.

A healthy weight loss can occur by paying close attention to calories. Consuming a well balance diet from complex carbohydrates, protein and fat is critical for weight control. Eating a variety of foods helps provide vitamins, minerals, fiber, and phytochemicals, all of which may help reduce chronic disease risk. You don't need to give up favorite foods when trying to maintain or lose weight.

