

# Carbohydrates – Diet Cornerstone or Cause for Confusion?

**Carbohydrates, lovingly or loathingly known as “carbs,” have become a source of considerable confusion in American popular culture.** They’ve been rumored to make us fat, their consumption has been limited to certain hours of the day, or more drastically, some diets have ruled them out completely.

The truth of the matter is that health authorities around the world, including our own USDA Dietary Guidelines for Americans and the Institute of Medicine, recommend that the majority (45-65%) of our daily calories come from carbohydrates for a balanced diet. The key is to not focus only on the quantity of carbohydrates in the diet: The quality of these carbohydrates is an equally important factor in a healthy, balanced diet. And that means emphasizing lots of fruits, vegetables and whole grains.

## The role of carbohydrates.

**Carbohydrates are an important source of calories in a balanced diet.** There are two main sub-categories of carbohydrates: simple sugars and complex carbohydrates, which are further broken down into starches and fibers. It’s important to consume all three kinds of carbohydrates in the recommended amounts.

**Many people do not realize that the USDA Dietary Guidelines for Americans and the Institute of Medicine, recommend that the majority (45-65%) of our daily calories come from carbohydrates for a balanced diet.**

- **Sugars** are easily digested in the body and absorbed into the bloodstream, to be used as an immediate energy source for the body’s tissues in the form of glucose, which is the major energy source for muscles and is the only dietary nutrient the brain can use.
- **Starches** are larger and made of glucose components that take longer to enter the bloodstream and act as a good medium-term source of dietary energy.
- **Fibers** are not digested or absorbed like sugars or starches. They may help lower blood glucose and some evidence indicates that they may reduce the risk for heart disease.

Too much glucose in the blood (also known as blood sugar), can lead to health problems. When glucose enters the bloodstream, the pancreas responds by releasing insulin in order for the body’s cells to be able to utilize circulating glucose. This process is known as the glycemic response. The more glucose that enters the bloodstream, the harder the pancreas has to work. If the body is continually faced with abnormally high blood-sugar levels, a resistance to insulin develops, which can in time lead to Type II Diabetes. According to the Institute of Medicine, over 23.6 million Americans were diagnosed with Type II Diabetes by the year 2008. That is nearly 7.6% of the U.S. population.

- Sugars are naturally present in fruit, vegetables and dairy; they are also added to foods in the form of table sugar, brown sugar, molasses, honey, and syrups, to name a few. Because of their negative impact on health, it is the added sugars that should be limited to no more than 25% of total daily caloric intake.
- Starches are found in plant-based foods, such as potatoes, legumes, and grains like rice, wheat, corn and oats, as well as in products made from grain, such as bread, breakfast cereals and pasta.

**Too much glucose in the body can lead to Type II Diabetes and other long-term health issues.**

## Choose quality over quantity.

**When selecting grain-based products, try to choose whole grains, or at least a mixture, rather than products made only with refined grains.** Refining grains removes the outer sections of the grain, reducing and removing a large amount of the beneficial nutrients like fiber, vitamins and minerals, while leaving behind predominantly starch and some protein.

Current USDA Dietary Guidelines recommend eating:

- **6 ounces of grain products every day**, at least half of which should come from whole grain sources.
- **At least 25 grams of fiber every day.** In addition to being present in whole grain products, there is also fiber in fruits, vegetables, beans and legumes.

**The USDA Dietary Guidelines recommend consuming at least 25 grams of fiber every day. The average American is only consuming approximately 15 grams per day or 60% of the recommended amount.**

**Sadly, the average American is only consuming approximately 15 grams of fiber per day.** In fact, in the midst of updating the Dietary Guidelines for Americans for 2010, the Advisory Committee has reported that American adults and children are consistently over-consuming calories, specifically from solid fats and added sugars, as well as refined carbohydrates and sodium. As a group, we're also under-consuming fruits, vegetables, dairy, whole grains and healthy oils. These dietary imbalances, along with physical inactivity and other, socio-economical factors, have led us to the current obesity epidemic, where two-thirds of all American adults and one-third of children are overweight or obese.

## Out-of-home consumers need appetizing options.

**Considering portion sizes and the quality of nutrients within food groups is paramount, especially in longer-term meal planning.** Offering diners more whole grain, fruit, vegetable and legume menu options, throughout all meal occasions and in a variety of formats, should naturally encourage a higher consumption of these foods. No one will sacrifice taste, but consumers will gladly eat healthier options that appeal to their senses: sight, taste, smell and touch. Many "good carbs" are found in a region's dietary heritage, so offering locally sourced, regional comfort foods can be a natural solution. A 2010 study by the American Dietetic Association indicates that buying or



consuming locally sourced ingredients – usually healthy sources of carbohydrates – continues to be a rising trend. Of the consumers polled, 35% indicated they would pay a higher price for locally grown foods. Utilizing this trend can help operators deliver fresh healthy carbohydrate options to their customers.

Of course, it's still important to offer desserts and other indulgence options in the dining experience—just be sure to monitor serving size and provide more fruit options. By making incremental changes, we can start to provide a healthy and adaptable dietary lifestyle for the out of home consumer.