



Carbohydrates & starchy foods



Health



Wellness



Nutrition



Support

Introduction

Starchy foods are one of the main food groups in a balanced diet. In fact, it's recommended they make up around one-third of the food we eat in a day.

Starchy foods are an important source of energy and fibre as well as vitamins and minerals.

They have been shown to reduce our risk of heart disease, type 2 diabetes, bowel cancer and inflammation.

Fibre from wholegrains is also important as it can provide food for 'good bacteria' in the gut and help us feel fuller for longer.

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What is a starchy food?

Starch is a type of carbohydrate found in certain plant foods. Starch is slower to break down in our bodies than sugar, which makes starchy foods great for longer-lasting energy through a day.

Examples of starchy foods include:

- Grains e.g. rice and oats
- Products made from grains e.g. breakfast cereals.
- Products made from flour e.g. any type of bread, pasta or noodles.
- Potatoes
- Root vegetables e.g. sweet potatoes, parsnips and turnips

When people talk about 'cutting carbs', this is often the food group they are thinking about. Sometimes people worry that carbohydrates are fattening, but that isn't the issue per se, and it's more important to consider the type of starchy foods we eat.

Starchy carbohydrates should be part of a healthy, balanced diet. However, reducing starchy carbohydrates from takeaways and other fast foods is important as this reduces the additional calories, sugars and saturated fats that come with these meals.

All carbohydrates are broken down into glucose for use as energy, the same way that sugars are. The difference with starchy foods is that the process to break them down takes longer, leaving us feeling more satisfied and less likely to overeat or crave a snack soon after a meal.

What does a portion look like?

Portion size is important in controlling overeating. Our plates have become bigger - and servings in supermarkets, restaurants and takeaways have too, making it harder for us to keep portions under control. Carbohydrates are often cheap and can bulk out meals to make you think you are getting good value when eating out.

Ideally, we should aim to eat three to four portions of starchy carbohydrate foods each day. They can be part of any meal, and ideally spread throughout the day.

A good example of a day's worth of starchy foods could be:

- Two wheat biscuits (40g)
- A fist full of spaghetti, roughly the size of a £1 coin in diameter (50-75g)
- About two handfuls of dried rice or pasta (50-75g)
- Two hands cupped together of cooked rice or pasta (100-150g)
- A baked potato about the size of your fist
- A handful of dried cereal (35-40g)

Remember, a portion should be specific to the person you are serving food to (i.e. a child portion should be smaller than an adult one).

Wholegrains

'Choose more wholegrains' is a common message to hear for health... and with good reason! Wholegrain foods are less processed and therefore higher in fibre - which is good news for our health.

Wholegrain foods take longer to break down than white varieties. This does not mean we can never eat the refined 'white' versions, or that they are 'bad' for us, but it's best to choose wholegrain versions most of the time.

Try to avoid eating lots of highly-processed carbohydrates such as cakes, sweets, chocolate, ready meals and fried foods. These add extra fat and calories and are less beneficial to your health.

A good way to spot a processed food is to look at the ingredients list. If this list has more than five ingredients and includes some ingredients you do not recognise, this is a sign of a highly-processed food.

Some examples of simple swaps you could make include:

- ✓ Porridge or overnight oats instead of higher processed cereals such as cornflakes, and other sugary cereals
- ✓ Wholegrain, seeded or 50/50 bread instead of white bread
- ✓ Wholegrain rice, pasta and noodles instead of white varieties
- ✓ Crispbreads, crackers or oatcakes instead of potato crisps

The white versions of products are not unhealthy and do not need to be avoided. Do not feel as though you need to swap everything, especially if you prefer the white variety. But any swaps you do make will be beneficial to your health.

What happens when we eat too many carbohydrates?

It is possible to overeat carbohydrates, just the same way that it's possible to overeat fats and proteins. Any extra glucose that we don't need can't be stored and instead is converted and stored as fat. That means it's important to choose the right type of carbohydrates and have daily physical activity.

It's easy to take in more energy than our body needs when we spend several hours a day sitting and not being active. Eating more than the recommended level of carbohydrates is also easier to do than other nutrients, and if this happens on a regular basis then it can negatively affect our health.

When the body regularly has high levels of blood glucose, our energy stores can become full. Glucose will then be stored as fat leading to weight gain and increasing our risk of type 2 diabetes and heart disease.

It's easier to overeat carbohydrates when we eat takeaways and pre-packaged foods, as often these contain more processed white versions of carbohydrates as they are cheaper and easier to use in meals. Cooking more meals from home is a great way to help prevent overeating.



What happens when we do not eat enough carbohydrates?

Carbohydrates are an important source of energy that is needed for the body to function normally. When you do not eat enough carbohydrates, the level of sugar in your blood may drop to below a normal range. This can cause us to feel tired, experience dizziness, hunger, shakiness or trembling, and even a fast or pounding heartbeat (palpitations).

Low carbohydrate diets do not have any long-term effectiveness and can lead to poor health and should be avoided unless advised by a trained medical professional, nutritionist or dietician. Even when a low carbohydrate diet is advised, there will always be a plan to reintroduce carbs and make them part of your normal eating pattern again.

Eating few or no carbohydrates is not a realistic choice for our busy lives. Finding the right amount of carbohydrates for you will take some trial and error, but wholegrain starchy carbohydrates should be an important part of your overall diet.

Understanding gluten

If you have no medical reason to do so, eating gluten-free provides no health benefits at all. Anyone who has allergies or diagnosed medical reasons such as Coeliac (pronounced see-lee-ak) Disease can find it harder to eat healthier starchy carbohydrates. If you are unsure about gluten in your diet, speak to your GP or a dietician.

It is possible to buy gluten-free products such as bread and pasta. However, these are often at a higher cost - and there are lots of starchy carbohydrates that do not contain gluten Including:

- rice
- potatoes
- products made with alternative flours such as rice flour or chickpea flour
- some oat products (check the label)

Final thought

Carbohydrates from starchy foods are an essential part of a healthy diet. Cooking from home with plain ingredients is the best way to control portions and prevent the extra sugars, salt and fats that come with out-of-home meals.

If you would like to learn more or require more information and support, please get in touch!

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