

**If there's one vice that we can't live without its carbohydrates. The popular low-carbohydrate diets such as Atkins and South Beach, have led many of us to believe that carbohydrates are "bad," and a cause of the obesity epidemic. What is your take on carbohydrates?**

Well, saying "carbohydrates are bad" is a dangerous oversimplification – it's on par with saying that "fat is bad." We know that some types fats are healthier than others; well, the same is true of carbohydrates.

The concern for me, as a Dietitian, is this blanket statement on the dangers of carbohydrates.

Carbohydrates are a very important part of a healthy diet. They provide the body with the fuel it needs for physical activity and for proper organ function.

In fact, one organ in particular - the brain - can only use carbohydrates as its energy source (unlike most other parts of the body that can use protein and fat as energy if needed). The brain needs a minimum of 130g of carbohydrates a day.

It's the easily digested carbohydrates from white bread, white rice, pop and other highly processed foods that contain little nutritional value. If these carbohydrate foods are part of your regular diet, they will certainly contribute to weight gain and increased risk of disease.

However, the best sources of carbohydrates—fruits, vegetables, beans and whole grains— do just the opposite—they promote good health. These foods are packed with essential vitamins and minerals, fiber, and a host of important phytonutrients.

### **What are the health benefits of eating these healthy carbohydrates?**

Because there is such an array of nutrients in carbohydrate foods, the list of health benefits is endless.

Repeated studies have documented the health benefits of carbohydrate foods, such as whole grains, including a reduced risk of the most common chronic health conditions:

- Stroke, Type 2 Diabetes, and Heart Disease.

Other benefits indicated by recent studies include:

- Reduced risk of asthma
- Healthier arteries
- Healthier blood pressure levels
- Reduction of inflammatory diseases
- Lower risk of colorectal cancer
- Less gum disease and tooth loss
- Reduced risk of birth defects

## How much carbohydrates do we need each day?

A. From these healthy sources - whole grains, beans, vegetables & fruit - we need:

- 220-330 grams per day (Men)
- 180-230 grams per day (Women)
- No less than 130 grams/day

## So, how do I know which carbohydrates to choose?

*The Canadian Nutrient File* and *The Glycemic Index* are both excellent tools to help you with this. In general, you want to be looking for carbohydrates that are high in fibre (at least 3 g/serving) and low in sugar (<8g/serving).

## When I have a craving, it's often for a carbohydrate food. What causes food cravings and how can I curb them?

There are many possible reasons why cravings develop:

1. Irregular eating and missed meals or snacks. If you don't eat enough food, you can create this feeling of intense hunger associated with cravings. This is due to *low blood sugars levels*.
2. Lack of specific nutrients. Some theories suggest you can crave what you lack.
3. Avoiding foods. Avoiding your favourite foods for long periods of time can make you crave something so much that you may end up over-indulging in it. (All-or-nothing approach)
4. Readily available snacks. Just knowing the chocolate or potato chips are nearby can make you want them more. So, "out of sight, out of mind" is often the best strategy.
5. Emotions! We've all experienced craving a treat because we've had a bad day? *Eating carbohydrate-rich foods like grains, starches and sweets increases serotonin production and help you to feeling calm and relaxed.* So, next time you have a bad day, and need a good dose of serotonin, fill up mostly on healthy carbohydrates like fresh fruits, vegetables and whole grains.

### **How do I prevent these cravings?**

1. Determine why you're hungry.
2. If it is true hunger, ask yourself why. Did you miss a meal? Is it time for a healthy snack? Try to eat something nutritious first. If you are still craving more, try to identify exactly what will satisfy the craving. Think about whether you want sweet, salty, crunchy, creamy, savoury, hot or cold. This strategy might help to address your craving better the next time.
3. Pour yourself a glass of water first. This may reduce the craving, since sometimes we mistake thirst for hunger.
4. Allow yourself to indulge in a craving once in a while without feeling guilty. There's nothing wrong with the occasional treat. At the same time, make it harder to get at your favorite treats by managing your environment and not stocking your house or workplace with foods you're likely to overeat. This will help set you up for success.
5. Emotional - Comfort yourself without food. Try going for a walk, taking a bath, getting some fresh air, reading a book, doing a hobby or calling a friend. Keeping physically active is one of the best ways to lessen cravings and boost your mood.

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