Confused about carbs: What's a good carbohydrate choice? [1]

Dear Alice!

I know that fruits are supposed to be good for you, but also contain many carbohydrates and convert immediately to sugar. Is it worthwhile to grab a piece of fruit versus a muffin, or other bread-like carb?

Thanks so much,
Jenny

Answer

Dear Jenny,

We need a variety of foods for good health and hunger satisfaction. This includes dietary sources of carbohydrates. Carbohydrates tend to get a bad rap, but in and of themselves, they are not bad for us. They are the preferred source of energy for the body, fueling the muscles as well as the brain.

You mentioned muffins, which generally are similar to a piece of cake. They usually contain flour, sugar, eggs, oil, and other ingredients, depending on the flavor. Don't be fooled by bran muffins - most typically don't contain significant amounts of bran, the fibrous part of a whole grain. In terms of other grain foods, it's best to choose whole grains.

To get a better sense of carbs' role as a nutrient and its effects on the body, here's a brief overview: carbohydrates are either "simple" or "complex."

Simple carbohydrates are made up of one or two sugar molecules. The three single sugar molecules, referred to as monosaccharides, are glucose, fructose, and galactose. These single sugars combine with each other to form disaccharides, which are:

- sucrose = glucose + fructose
  found in fruits, vegetables, and table sugar

- lactose = glucose + galactose
  found in milk and milk products
maltose = glucose + glucose
formed when starches are broken down

**Complex carbohydrates**, also known as starches and fiber, are polysaccharides and oligosaccharides, which are long chains of sugar molecules. Starches are found in plant-based foods, such as rice, potatoes, beans, and grains. Fiber is found in a variety of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.

Not all carbohydrates convert immediately to "sugar," or more accurately, to blood glucose. The digestive tract breaks down the long chains of sugars in complex carbohydrates into single sugars. Fructose and galactose do not immediately raise blood glucose levels, since they are first sent to the liver to be converted into glucose. Also, fiber is not digested by our gastrointestinal system, so it passes through, aiding digestion and contributing to feelings of fullness. Foods containing fiber often raise blood sugar more slowly than those without it.

However, there's more to a food than the amount it will increase blood glucose levels. Fruit contains many vitamins, minerals, and phytochemicals (plant chemicals) that are beneficial to good health. They are generally low in calories, and certainly are a good choice for a snack. As a matter of fact, many fruits contain a good amount of fiber, and more fructose than glucose. Examples of fruits that don't raise blood sugar quickly are fresh cherries, apples, pears, and plums. If you're hungry, some days, a couple of whole grain crackers may do the trick; other days, a piece of fruit will do. If you're really hungry, the piece of fruit may not suffice ? you may want to add a handful of nuts, or a few whole grain snacks to satisfy you.

When different foods are eaten together, the rate at which blood sugar increases is an average of the various items, and is also dependent on the quantity of food eaten. In addition to providing a wide array of nutrients, different foods provide various textures, flavors, and feelings in our mouths (known as mouth feel). These aspects of food provide much satisfaction ? think about how we'd feel if we didn't have anything crunchy, chewy, fruity, creamy, etc. in our diet. These are more than enough reasons to see why it's critical to include an assortment of foods each day.

Hope this helps you make healthier choices.

Alice!

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