Is it true that eating too many carbohydrates can cause diabetes? [1]

Dear Alice,

Can eating too many carbohydrates increase your chances of developing diabetes?

— Concerned

Answer

Dear Concerned,

While intake of carbohydrates specifically doesn't cause diabetes, eating too many calories overall (from carbohydrates or other types of food) may lead to diabetes in some people. Here's what's going on: usually when a person eats, their blood glucose rises. In response insulin, which is a hormone secreted by the pancreas, is released. Insulin helps cells in the body absorb glucose from the blood, which will be used for energy or stored as fat. People with diabetes either don't produce enough insulin, their bodies don't respond to the insulin, or both. As a result, glucose remains in the blood, depriving the body's cells of energy they need, and causes damage throughout the body. There are a number of risk factors for diabetes, but eating carbohydrates, on its own, doesn't increase that risk.

The likelihood of developing diabetes can increase due to a number of factors. Eating more calories than you expend, whether they're complex carbohydrates, sugars, fats, or proteins, paired with a lack of physical activity and being overweight can increase some people's chances of developing diabetes. This is especially true if there's a family history of the disease, and the individual is over the age of 45.
The good news is that many people with or at-risk for developing diabetes are able to manage their condition through regular physical activity and a healthy pattern of eating. Getting regular physical activity actually helps the body’s cells to properly use insulin. Following a healthy, balanced pattern of eating that includes fresh whole foods (e.g., grains, veggies, fruits, nuts, legumes) also helps to ensure the proper functioning of glucose and insulin in the body. For tips on how to incorporate regular physical activity and balanced patterns of eating into your life, check out the Go Ask Alice! Nutrition & Physical Activity archives.

If you’re concerned that you may be at risk for developing diabetes, it’s best to talk with your health care provider. They’ll be able to assess your risk factors and recommend strategies for reducing that risk, including meeting with a registered dietitian to help plan your meals or a personal trainer to get you active.

Related questions

- Diabetes: No risk factors, so why do I have symptoms? [5]
- Confused about carbs: What’s a good carbohydrate choice? [6]
- Beginning to exercise and out of breath! [7]
- Is it better to be fit and fat, or unfit and thin? [8]

Resources

- Medical Services (Morningside) [9]
- Columbia Health Nutrition Services (Morningside) [10]
- Dodge Fitness Center (Morningside) [11]
- Medical Services (CUIMC) [12]
- Student Health Service Nutrition Services (CUIMC) [13]
- Bard Athletic Center (CUIMC) [14]

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