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

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,

As the preferred source of energy for the body, carbohydrates are one of the many necessary components of a healthy and balanced diet. It’s great that you’re thinking about this and the nuances of your food choices. You’re right in that both are sources of carbohydrates, and when thinking about which to eat, it can be helpful to think about what types of carbs are in each food and what your energy needs are at the time. There are different types of carbs which convert to sugar at different rates. It can also be helpful to think about the presence of other nutrients in these food choices and what you need in a given time period to maintain a balanced diet. Hungry for more? Keep on reading!

Carbs can vary between simple and complex, and each has different characteristics. 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, lactose, and maltose. These can occur naturally in fruits (fructose), veggies, milk, and milk products (lactose). This category also includes sucrose or table sugar. Complex carbs, on the other hand, are comprised of many sugar molecules. Starch and fiber are considered complex carbs. Starch can be found in veggies, grains, beans, and peas. Fiber is found in all of these, as well as fruit! Maintaining a good balance of all of these types of carbs can help to fuel your body and keep it energized.

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 don't immediately raise blood glucose levels since they’re first sent to the liver to be converted into glucose. Also, fiber isn't digested by the 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. 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.

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 associated with a number of health benefits. Fruits are generally low in calories and can be a nutritious and delicious snack. As a matter of fact, many fruits contain a good amount of fiber and more fructose than glucose. Some fruits that don't raise blood sugar quickly are fresh cherries, apples, pears, and plums. However, if you're really hungry, the piece of fruit may not suffice, so you may want to add a handful of nuts, or a few whole grain snacks to satisfy you. In addition, it's worth being wary of packaged goods with "low carb" on the product labels. Since the Food and Drug Administration doesn't regulate these terms, there's no set meaning. Therefore, rather than considering simply the carbohydrate count, thinking about all of the nutrients in relation to each other may be more informative.

In a nutshell, carbohydrates help to fuel the body, as well as provide essential nutrients. However, it's still key to be selective about from where you get these carbs. It's recommended that individuals choose whole grains instead of refined grains, stick to low-fat dairy products, eat plenty of legumes, and limit added sugars. Generally speaking, the recommended serving for carbohydrates is 45 to 65 percent of the average total daily calories, which translates to 225 and 325 grams of carbohydrates when based on a 2,000 calorie per day diet. That being said, everyone has different needs, based on a number of different factors including certain medical conditions and activity level. For more information on food choices, check out the Go Ask Alice! Nutrition & Physical Activity archives. A health care provider or registered dietitian would also be able to help inform some of these food choices.

Hopefully, this simplified a complex topic,

Alice!

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