

# Refined Carbs and Sugar: The Diet Saboteurs

**They're the comfort foods we most often crave: pasta, fries, pizza, white bread, sugary desserts. But here's how choosing healthier carbs can improve your health and waistline.**



## **Why are refined carbs and sugar so bad for your health?**

Refined or simple carbohydrates include sugars and refined grains that have been stripped of all bran, fiber, and nutrients. These include white bread, pizza dough, pasta, pastries, white flour, white rice, sweet desserts, and many breakfast cereals. They digest quickly and their high glycemic index causes unhealthy spikes in blood sugar levels. They can also cause fluctuations in mood and energy and a build-up of fat, especially around your waistline.

When you eat refined carbs, your bloodstream is flooded with sugar which triggers a surge

of insulin to clear the sugar from your blood. All this insulin can leave you feeling hungry soon after a meal, often craving more sugary carbs. This can cause you to overeat, put on weight, and over time lead to insulin resistance and type-2 diabetes. Diets high in refined carbs and sugar have also been linked to high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity, hyperactivity, mood disorders, and even suicide in teenagers.

For many of us, cutting back on sugary treats and overcoming our carb cravings can seem like a daunting task. As well as being present in obvious foods such as sugary snacks, desserts, and candies, sugar is also hidden in much of the processed food we eat—from soda, coffee and fruit drinks to bread, pasta sauce, and frozen dinners. But cutting back on these diet saboteurs doesn't mean feeling unsatisfied or never enjoying comfort food again. The key is to choose the right carbs. Complex carbs such as vegetables, whole grains, and naturally sweet fruit digest slower, resulting in stable blood sugar and less fat accumulation.

By focusing on whole foods and complex, unrefined carbs, you can reduce your intake of sugar and refined carbs, keep your blood sugar stable, [maintain a healthy weight](#), and still find ways to satisfy your sweet tooth. You'll not only feel healthier and more energetic, you could also shed that stubborn belly fat so many of us struggle with.

## **The not-so-sweet link between sugar and belly fat**

A lot of belly fat surrounds the abdominal organs and liver and is closely linked to insulin resistance and an increased risk of diabetes. Calories obtained from fructose (found in sugary beverages such as soda, energy and sports drinks, coffee drinks, and processed foods like doughnuts, muffins, cereal, candy, and granola bars) are more likely to add weight around your abdomen. Cutting back on sugary foods can mean a slimmer waistline as well as a lower risk of diabetes.

## **Good carbs vs. bad carbs**

Carbohydrates are one of your body's main sources of energy. Health organizations such as the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recommend that 45 to 65 percent of your daily calories should come from carbohydrates. However, the majority of these should be from complex, unrefined carbs rather than refined carbs (including starches such as potatoes and corn).

Unlike simple carbs, complex carbohydrates are digested slowly, causing a gradual rise in

blood sugar. They're usually [high in nutrients and fiber](#), which can help prevent serious disease, aid with weight-loss, and improve your energy levels. In general, "good" carbohydrates have a lower glycemic load and can even help guard against type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular problems in the future.

Good carbs include:

**Unrefined whole grains** - whole wheat or multigrain bread, brown rice, barley, quinoa, bran cereal, oatmeal

**Non-starchy vegetables** - spinach, green beans, Brussels sprouts, celery, tomatoes

**Legumes** - kidney beans, baked beans, peas, lentils

**Nuts** - peanuts, cashews, walnuts

**Fruit** - apples, berries, citrus fruit, bananas, pears

## What is the glycemic index and glycemic load?

The glycemic index (GI) measures how rapidly a food spikes your blood sugar, while the glycemic load measures the amount of digestible carbohydrate (total carbohydrate minus fiber) the food contains. While both can be useful tools, having to refer to different tables can be unnecessarily complicated. Unless you're on a specific diet, most people find it easiest to stick to the broad guidelines of what makes a carb "good" or "bad".

### Switching to good carbs

---

While there are many health benefits to switching from refined to complex carbs, you don't have to consign yourself to never again eating French fries or a slice of white bread. After all, when you ban certain foods, it's natural to crave those foods even more. Instead, make refined carbs and sugary foods an occasional indulgence rather than a regular part of your diet. As you reduce your intake of these unhealthy foods, you'll likely find yourself craving them less and less.

Choosing healthier carbs

Instead of...

White rice

Try...

Brown or wild rice, riced cauliflower

## Choosing healthier carbs

White potatoes (including fries and mashed potatoes)	Cauliflower mash, sweet potato
Regular pasta	Whole-wheat pasta, spaghetti squash
White bread	Whole-wheat or whole-grain bread
Sugary breakfast cereal	High-fiber, low-sugar cereal
Instant oatmeal	Steel-cut or rolled oats
Cornflakes	Low-sugar bran flakes
Corn	Leafy greens
Corn or potato chips	Nuts, or raw veggies for dipping

## Added sugar is just empty calories

Your body gets all the sugar it needs from that naturally occurring in food—fructose in fruit or lactose in milk, for example. All the sugar added to processed food offers no nutritional value—but just means a lot of empty calories that can sabotage any healthy diet, contribute to weight gain, and increase your risk for serious health problems.

Again, it's unrealistic to try to eliminate all sugar and empty calories from your diet. The American Heart Association recommends limiting the amount of added sugars you consume to no more than 100 calories per day (about 6 teaspoons or 24 grams of sugar) for women and 150 calories per day (9 teaspoons or 36 grams) for men. If that still sounds like a lot, it's worth remembering that a 12-ounce soda contains up to 10 teaspoons of added sugar—some shakes and sweetened coffee drinks even more. The average American currently consumes 19.5 teaspoons (82 grams) of added sugar each day, often without realizing it. By becoming more aware of the sugar in your diet, you can cut down to the recommended levels and make a huge difference to the way you look, think, and feel.

### How to cut down on sugar

---

**Slowly reduce the sugar in your diet a little at a time** to give your taste buds time to adjust and wean yourself off the craving.

**Cook more at home.** By preparing more of your own food, you can ensure that you and your family eat fresh, wholesome meals without added sugar.

**Give recipes a makeover.** Many dessert recipes taste just as good with less sugar.

**Avoid sugary drinks—even “diet” versions.** Artificial sweetener can still trigger sugar cravings that contribute to weight gain. Instead of soda, try adding a splash of fruit juice to sparkling water. Or blend skim milk with a banana or berries for a delicious, healthy smoothie.

**Avoid processed or packaged foods.** About 75% of packaged food in the U.S. contains added sugar—including canned soups, frozen dinners, and low-fat meals—that can quickly add up to unhealthy amounts.

**Be careful when eating out.** Most gravy, dressings, and sauces are packed with sugar, so ask for it to be served on the side.

**Eat healthier snacks.** Cut down on sweet snacks such as candy, chocolate, and cakes. Instead, satisfy your sweet tooth with naturally sweet food such as fruit, peppers, or natural peanut butter.

**Create your own frozen treats.** Freeze pure fruit juice in an ice-cube tray with plastic spoons as popsicle handles. Or make frozen fruit kabobs using pineapple chunks, bananas, grapes, and berries.

**Check labels** of all the packaged food you buy. Choose low-sugar products—but be aware that manufacturers often try to hide sugar on labels.

## How to spot hidden sugar in your food

Being smart about sweets is only part of the battle of reducing sugar in your diet. Sugar is also hidden in many packaged foods, fast food meals, and grocery store staples such as bread, cereals, canned goods, pasta sauce, margarine, instant mashed potatoes, frozen dinners, low-fat meals, and ketchup. The first step is to spot hidden sugar on food labels, which can take some sleuthing:

Manufacturers provide the total amount of sugar on their labels but do not have to differentiate between added sugar and sugar that is naturally in the food.

Added sugars are listed in the ingredients but aren't always easily recognizable as such. While sugar, honey, or molasses are easy enough to spot, added sugar could also be listed as corn sweetener, high-fructose corn syrup, evaporated cane juice, agave nectar, cane crystals, invert sugar, or any kind of fructose, dextrose, lactose, maltose, or syrup.

While you'd expect sugary foods to have sugar listed near the top of their list of ingredients, manufacturers often use different types of added sugars which then appear scattered down the list. But all these little doses of different sweeteners can add up to a lot of extra sugar and empty calories!



## Get more help

[Healthy Eating](#) - A guide to the new nutrition. (Harvard Medical School Special Health Report)

[Carbohydrates and Blood Sugar](#) - How to choose healthy carbs, including lists of the glycemic load of different foods. (Harvard School of Public Health)

[Cutting back on added sugar](#) - How cutting back on sweetened beverages is a good place to start on reducing your sugar intake. (Harvard Health Publishing)

[How to spot and avoid added sugar](#) - Why sugar is so bad for you and how to spot it hidden in food. (Harvard Health Publishing)

**Authors: Lawrence Robinson, Jeanne Segal, Ph.D., and Robert Segal, M.A. Last updated: June 2019.**