

Refined Carbs and Sugar: The Diet Saboteurs

How Choosing Healthier Carbs Can Improve Your Health and Waistline



They're the comfort foods we crave when we're feeling down or stressed: pasta, fries, white bread, cookies, pastries, ice cream, cakes. But these simple or refined carbohydrates cause rapid spikes in blood sugar, fluctuations in mood and energy, and a build-up of fat, especially around your waistline. 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. You'll not only feel healthier and more energetic, you could also shed that stubborn belly fat so many of us struggle with.

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, and many breakfast cereals. They digest quickly and their high glycemic index causes unhealthy spikes in blood sugar levels.

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 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](/articles/diets/how-to-lose-weight-and-keep-it-off.htm) (/articles/diets/how-to-lose-weight-and-keep-it-off.htm), and still find ways to satisfy your sweet tooth.

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](/articles/healthy-eating/high-fiber-foods.htm) (/articles/healthy-eating/high-fiber-foods.htm), 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...	Try...
White rice	Brown or wild rice, riced cauliflower
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

Choosing healthier carbs

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:

Do some detective work

Manufacturers are required to provide the total amount of sugar in a serving but do not have to spell out how much of this sugar has been added and how much is naturally in the food. The trick is deciphering which ingredients are added sugars. Aside from the obvious ones—**sugar, honey, molasses**—added sugar can appear as **agave nectar, cane crystals, corn sweetener, crystalline fructose, dextrose, evaporated cane juice, fructose, high-fructose corn syrup, invert sugar, lactose, maltose, malt syrup**, and more.

A wise approach is to avoid products that have any of these added sugars at or near the top of the list of ingredients—or ones that have several different types of sugar scattered throughout the list. If a product is chock-full of sugar, you would expect to see “sugar” listed first, or maybe second. But food makers can fudge the list by adding sweeteners that aren’t technically called sugar. The trick is that each sweetener is listed separately. The contribution of each added sugar may be small enough that it shows up fourth, fifth, or even further down the list. But add them up and you can get a surprising dose of added sugar.

Let’s take as an example a popular oat-based cereal with almonds whose package boasts that it is “great tasting,” “heart healthy” and “whole grain guaranteed.” Here’s the list of ingredients:

Whole-grain oats, whole-grain wheat, brown sugar, almond pieces, sugar, crisp oats,* corn syrup, barley malt extract, potassium citrate, toasted oats,* salt, malt syrup, wheat bits,* honey, and cinnamon. *contain sugar, high-fructose corn syrup, honey, and/or brown sugar molasses.

Combine brown sugar, sugar, corn syrup, barley malt extract, high-fructose corn syrup, honey, brown sugar molasses, and malt syrup, and they add up to a hefty dose of empty calories—more than one-quarter (27%) of this cereal is added sugar, which you might not guess from scanning the ingredient list.

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