

What are Carbohydrates?

Carbohydrates are compounds found in certain foods that are used as the body's primary source of fuel. They include sugar, fiber and starches, which serve as an energy source for physical and metabolic reactions. To supply energy to the body, carbohydrates must undergo the process of digestion, where they are eventually broken down into their simplest form: glucose. As a primary energy source, glucose supplies the resources we need to power every cell in the body, while giving the skeletal muscles, heart, brain and other vital organs fuel to perform all their necessary functions. Carbohydrates can be found in many foods, including whole grains, vegetables, fruit, beans/lentils and milk.

Aside from energy, carbohydrates have specialized functions as well. [Fiber](#), for example, is a carbohydrate that contributes to your overall health by helping to lower your risk of heart disease, diabetes and obesity, while also providing assistance with common digestive issues such as constipation (AND, 2014). Fiber is predominantly found in whole grains, fruit and vegetables. The recommended amount of fiber most individuals need is around 25 grams per day. Unfortunately, the average American typically gets about half that amount.

Simple vs. Complex Carbohydrates

Carbohydrates are classified as either simple or complex. Simple carbohydrates, such as sugar and honey, are smaller compounds that break apart easily and, as a result, turn to glucose rapidly. Complex carbohydrates are often found in higher-fiber foods, such as whole-wheat bread and oatmeal. Unlike the simple variety, they are larger and take longer to break down. Including more complex carbohydrates in your diet not only provides sustained energy over time but also helps to control the release of sugar into the bloodstream, which is important in the treatment of diabetes.

Key Recommendations

Although individual goals may vary, most people require about [135 grams of carbohydrates](#) each day. It's important that these carbohydrates come from sources that supply the body with useful nutrients. Recommended sources include fruit, vegetables, milk and whole grains. Ideally, you should [limit the amount of added sugar](#) in your diet to no more than 10% of the overall calories you consume each day. This helps ensure a healthier eating pattern with a lower amount of "empty calories" that contribute less to health and more to weight gain.

Healthful members of the carbohydrate family have the ability to provide needed energy to the body and enhance health and well-being in many ways. Understanding more about carbohydrates, including where they come from and what purpose they serve, can help us make peace with this often-maligned nutrient.