

CARB:

another four-letter word?

CARBOHYDRATES ARE THE LATEST HEALTH BUZZWORD BUT MOST OF US DON'T KNOW THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN 'GOOD' CARBS AND 'BAD' CARBS.

By Eve Lees

ARE CARBOHYDRATES REALLY BAD FOR US? Carbohydrates are the body's chief source of energy – like gasoline is to a car. Carbs provide energy to all body tissues in the form of glucose. It fuels your body and your brain too. The richest sources of carbohydrates are anything that grows from the earth – fruit, vegetables, grains and legumes. These are also whole foods or complex carbohydrates, which our body breaks down during digestion.

What we don't need is the junk carbs so prevalent among our food choices today: the processed, refined foods. These are whole foods or complex carbs that man has broken down and changed before digestion.

Carbohydrate is the latest health buzzword. But the reviews aren't favourable and carb has become another four-letter word. Low-carb diets tell us carbs are the reason we become insulin resistant and gain weight, as indicated by the rising incidents of obesity and diabetes. But "carbohydrates" were around long before these high disease rates occurred. Processed carbs weren't. Therefore, carbohydrates aren't the problem, say nutritionists. It's the processed, refined carbohydrates that throw our bodies out of balance.

The body is designed to slowly and methodically break down a whole food into the nutrients it needs. Refined sugars and processed foods are already broken down and absorbed very quickly. Eating them too frequently is stressful to the body.

We need to choose quality carbohydrate foods and put them into our diet in a balanced way, explains Vancouver dietitian Patricia Chuey, in her book *101 Most Asked Nutrition Questions*.

"In my opinion, we are grain-a-holics," says Chuey. She thinks we overdo it on lower quality grains that are high in fat, high in sugar or low in fibre (processed foods). Even some who sell the products for low-carb diets agree processed carbs are a problem.

"Many of us really don't know the difference between good carbs and bad carbs," says Scott Dyck, owner of Taurus Fitness in Langley. He sells a line of low-carb products in his sport nutrition store. He also thinks we're ruining our health on refined foods. Dyck suggests we should follow not a low-carb diet, but a "proper carb diet".

However, he does recommend a low-carb diet and its products for certain individuals. "It depends on what their particular needs are and what body type they have," says Dyck.

Tammy-Lynn McNabb, owner of the Low-Carb





Centre, just opened her fourth Lower-Mainland location in White Rock. Her stores provide various low-carb products. McNabb also agrees that carbs are not bad for us.

"We need the proper carbohydrates. The whole carbs, not processed ones," suggests McNabb. "The fast foods and processed foods – these are the carbs hurting us and our children."

McNabb says she eats a lot of carbohydrates daily, "But I choose them wisely." She adds if she must resort to a more refined product, she'll choose a low-carb, soy-based one that won't convert to glucose faster than other products do.

As for low-carb diets in general, "I think it's a great diet if you have a good chunk of weight to lose," says McNabb who maintained a weight loss of 30 pounds for two years. Her husband lost 55. McNabb adds the trick to maintaining weight loss is to avoid eating the processed, refined carbs. Eat fresh fruit and vegetables, legumes and root vegetables, and cooked, whole grains.

Dianna Steele, a registered dietitian with Eating For Energy in Vancouver, doesn't recommend diets like Atkins to anyone. In a recent Vancouver Sun report, she warns it may increase risk for heart disease, stroke, cancer, diverticulosis and constipation. Low-carb dieters may experience fatigue, nausea, dizziness, headaches, mental confusion, sleep problems and bad breath. Diabetics should not follow a restricted carb diet, says Steele, as the excess protein can be taxing on the kidneys.

Steele is concerned the Atkins Diet is too low in fruit, vegetables and fibre. And the diet doesn't emphasize portion control, which is the best way to correct overeating habits.

"Losing weight isn't just about the food you are eating," says Marlene Aylen, operations manager of Weight Watchers in White Rock. "It's really

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*Marlene Aylen,
operations manager of Weight
Watchers, White Rock*



about lifestyle and making sensible choices.”

Aylen lost about 30 pounds several years ago and kept it off by eating sensibly and not omitting any food or food group, as the Weight Watchers diet advocates.

“Carbs are an important part of our diet, and we don’t know the long term consequences of cutting back on carbs,” says Aylen. “You need to make lifestyle changes. You have to consider your daily habits; Are you active? How do you cook? Do

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Aylen suggests everything you do to lose weight should be the same thing you’ll do years later. It’s important to ask yourself if the diet is healthy to follow for the rest of your life.

A short-term study on the Atkins Diet suggests it may reduce cardiovascular risk factors, particularly in lowering cholesterol levels. University of Cincinnati obesity researcher, Bonnie Brehm, who conducted the six-month study on the Atkins Diet, says the weight loss seemed to override the high saturated fat content of the diet. She adds this may be just temporary.

“What happens to cholesterol levels after weight stabilizes isn’t known,” reported Brehm in Nutrition Action Healthletter. Although cholesterol levels were found to go down, those in the study had normal, not high, cholesterol

levels. Brehm says more research is needed.

Brehm also mentions the study participants had constipation problems. They averaged about five grams of fibre a day – much lower than the 25-40g recommended daily. And that can be a concern. If you’re not “regular,” the food waste sitting in your body puts you at higher risk for colon and other cancers.

The human race is getting sicker. It’s not just obesity and diabetes, but cancers and cardiovascular disease are also on the rise. And diseases like SARS or Avian Flu may have been around for centuries. Perhaps our resistance to them is faltering. Recently, babies in China died on a diet of milk powder that turned out to be just flour and sugar. Our chips-and-pop-culture kids are getting fatter and developing depression and diabetes along with it. Processed, refined foods are a contributing factor to declining health. They lack the nutrition needed to strengthen our bodies and our immune systems. Ditto for low-carb diets, say nutritionists.

“It’s so restrictive,” says Brehm about the Atkins diet. “You miss out on fibre and any phytochemicals in fruits and vegetables that we may not even know about yet.”

Dietary balance is the key, says Chuey. “Everything in nature, including the human body, exists ideally in a state of balance. If balance is the ideal state, this means that too little of a nutrient would be a bad thing. Equally true is that too much would be bad.”

We shouldn’t imbalance any nutrient, be it protein or carbohydrates.

Perhaps the best strategy to correct an insulin imbalance and lose the resulting weight is to eat more natural carbs and less of the carbs that can create the problem – the junk food.

Nutritionists recommend at least 55 per cent carbohydrates of daily calories. That’s about 300 grams in a 2,000-



Carbs provide energy...

calorie diet. Eat mostly complex carbs. If it isn't in a form Mother Nature created, it may not be a healthy choice. Cut back on the foods designed and altered by man. Choose an apple as a snack instead of a granola bar.

Carbohydrates are not "bad" for us. We must avoid using the word carbohydrate when we really mean processed, refined foods.

Try to be more specific when you think carbs. Try to cut down on eating junk. ■

Sources:

Eve Lees, Fitness and Nutrition Specialist, CPT, NWS

Nutrition Action Healthletter, Jan/Feb 2004

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101 Most Asked Nutrition Questions, Patricia Chuey, RD, Vancouver

Tammy-Lynn McNabb, Low-Carb Centre, lower mainland

Scott Dyck, Taurus Fitness, White Rock

Marlene Aylen, Operations Manager Weight Watchers, White Rock

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The Skinny on low carbs

BEFORE YOU DECIDE TO SEVERELY LIMIT CARBOHYDRATES IN YOUR DIET, CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING:

High fat/protein diets increase the risk of heart disease, liver and kidney problems, osteoporosis, high cholesterol levels, and cancer.

- Carbohydrates are our main fuel source. Ask any athlete. Lack of carbs causes fatigue. Carbohydrates stored in the liver are also the chief energy source for the brain. The brain needs over 400 calories daily, and the liver's carbohydrate stores must be refilled regularly.
- A restricted variety of food restricts nutrients vital for good health. The deeper and brighter-coloured fruits, vegetables and root vegetables (many banned on low-carb diets) are the richest source of disease-fighting compounds needed to boost immunity.
- The quick weight loss from low-carb diets is appealing, but weight loss is achieved on any low calorie diet. Quick weight loss is a sudden shock to the body after functioning at a higher body weight. The body will fight to reach that familiar operating level again. Of those who lose weight quickly, 98 per cent regain it within five years. Gradual loss (one pound weekly) enables the body and mind to slowly adapt to physiological changes without rebellion.
- Low-carb advocates say, "Excess carbs are stored as body fat." Actually, anything in excess (carbs, protein or fat) are stored as body fat. More accurately, it's excess calories that cause weight gain.
- Low-carb promoters also claim, "Fat is burned in the absence of carbs." Not so. Fat is more effectively burned in the presence of

carbs, because the body's energy systems use them together in varying ratios (depending on how active you are). When carbs are not available for energy, the body does use fat, but with it, lots of protein (muscle) too. Muscle tissue is more efficiently converted to energy than fat. This means you lose mostly muscle and water. Muscle is metabolically active. Fat isn't. With less muscle you'll have a slower metabolism and therefore burn calories slower.

- On a severe carb-depleted diet, the breakdown of fat as an alternate source of fuel (ketosis) increases blood levels of ammonia and uric acid. These are toxic metabolic waste products. Ketosis is also called acidosis. Being in Ketosis for a long period of time creates a highly acidic environment. This is not a natural pH for the body and eventually leads to health problems. Ketosis isn't advised for those with (or at high risk for) gout, kidney problems or diabetes. Ketosis also produces acetone, a foul-smelling by-product evident in breath odour.
- High circulating ketone levels will suppress appetite, but when you begin eating normally again, ketone levels fall and hunger returns. So will the weight.
- High protein, low-carb diets are dehydrating. Loss of water means loss of minerals like calcium. Dehydration creates several disorders including fatigue, inability to concentrate, muscle cramps, constipation, poor temperature control, and dry, wrinkled skin.
- Fibre is a carbohydrate important for internal cleansing. Low-carb dieters are often constipated and/or defecate infrequently. ■