



## Top 3 Nutrition Questions about Carbs, Gluten, and Sugar

By Andrea Holwegner BSc, RD

### 1. Are carbs bad?

No! Your brain runs exclusively on carbs (you can think of all carbs as single, double and longer chains of sugar). The Institute of Medicine of the National Academies in partnership with Health Canada suggests the average minimum amount of carbohydrate needed for the brain of children and adults is 130 grams per day. This amount of carbohydrate is the equivalent of eating 2 slices of bread, 1 cup of rice and several pieces of fruit, for example. In addition to this, you also need carbs to fuel your muscles for physical activity. Adult women and adult men require approximately 180-230 grams and 220-330 grams of carbohydrate or more per day respectively.



When carbohydrate is not consumed in sufficient amounts, you may feel tired, anxious, depressed, have difficulty concentrating, or experience muscle fatigue when exercising. If you eat more carbohydrates than your body needs (just like if you eat too much protein or fat), extra calories are stored as body fat. Also, keep in mind that carbohydrate stores water on your body. It is not uncommon for low-carb dieters to lose 5-15 pounds of water weight when restricting carbohydrates.

Carbohydrates are found in fruits, vegetables, grains, legumes, some dairy foods, and sweets. Despite popular claims that you can skip grains and just eat vegetables and fruit, keep in mind that grains provide different types of fibre, B-vitamins, and other nutrients that are not found in fruits and vegetables. For optimal health, choose a wide variety of foods. If you only eat blueberries and apples each day you will miss out on the many nutrients found in other fruits.

Carbohydrates are comfort foods that play a direct role in elevating the neurotransmitter serotonin which boosts mood. Protein rich foods are not comfort foods for your brain. When was the last time you actually craved eggs, meat or cottage cheese when you were tired, sad, or mad? Carbohydrates such as pasta, bread, sweets and potato chips are in essence happy foods the brain will crave when you are tired, hungry, mad, or sad. Since these foods are very enjoyable and readily available, it is important to manage portion sizes but certainly not

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eliminate them. If you try to deprive yourself of something enjoyable, chances are you will likely seek it out, obsess about it, and eventually overeat.

## 2. Does wheat give me a belly and will a gluten-free diet help me lose weight?

Gluten is a protein found in wheat, rye, and barley. The only people that need to avoid gluten are those with celiac disease (which the Canadian Celiac Association estimates affects approximately 1 in 133 Canadians) as gluten causes serious damage to their gut. There are also people that have a non-celiac gluten sensitivity that affects an estimated 2-6% of us, and these individuals may find reducing gluten will help reduce digestion symptoms.

There is no need to remove gluten or wheat to lose weight. Healthy weight loss involves reducing calories consumed and/or increasing calories expended by physical activity, not cutting out specific foods.

If you are overweight, reducing calories from foods containing carbohydrates, protein, or fat will create the same level of weight loss over the long run. Simply switching the same amount of calories of a gluten containing food to gluten-free foods will not affect your weight.

Don't be fooled by the extra initial weight loss of a low-carbohydrate diet; this indicates you have essentially dehydrated yourself, since carbohydrates store fluid on the body. Since wheat and gluten-containing foods are high in carbohydrates, eliminating these and not replacing them with other carbohydrate-rich foods may result in five or more pounds of fluid loss on your body.

## 3. How much sugar is OK to eat?

There have been plenty of negative discussions about sugar in the media, documentary films, as well as consultations by groups such as the World Health Organization and Health Canada's recent proposed food label changes. Similar to consuming too much of anything, too much sugar can increase the total calories of your diet and increase the risk of obesity. Excess sugar consumption is also a large concern for tooth decay in adults and children. Taking in too much sugar can also take the place for other nutrient dense foods that are rich in nutrients such as vitamins, minerals, and fibre that we need for good health. There is also growing research to suggest that high sugar consumption can increase triglycerides (a blood fat similar to cholesterol that can increase the risk of heart disease).

The 2002 World Health Organization (WHO) recommendations suggest added sugars should make up less than 10% of total energy per day. The new draft guidelines also suggests that added sugars should make up less than 10% of total energy, but also that a reduction to less than 5% of total energy intake would have additional benefits.



While we all need variable levels of calories, as an example, for a 2000-calorie diet, 5% of total energy would be the equivalent of 25 grams of sugar per day (about 6 teaspoons). One can of pop has about 40 grams sugar (10 teaspoons), and one cup of sugary cereal has about 15 grams sugar (4 teaspoons), and a couple of bought cookies without icing has at least 15 grams sugar (4 teaspoons).

No one food or nutrient contributes to obesity, disease, and health issues. There are no bad foods, just bad overall diets. Similar to the trends we have seen in the past for low-fat diets and low-carb diets, remember to keep things in perspective. Sugar is not a villain and you don't need to have a sugar-free diet. If you have been consuming an excessive amount of pop, sugary beverages, candy, desserts, and other sugary foods, of course you could benefit from reducing these. You don't need to eliminate them, but be clear on what you *really love* and save room for these favorites.

You won't find me eating candy and pop since they are not my favorites, but I do love chocolate and homemade baked goods such as muffins and cookies that contain regular white sugar. I also enjoy maple syrup on pancakes, and a sprinkle of brown sugar on oatmeal. Be choosy and pick your favorites!

### **Where can I find out more information?**

Visit Andrea Holwegner's website [www.healthstandnutrition.com](http://www.healthstandnutrition.com) for hundreds of free resources, healthy recipes and a highly respect bi-monthly e-newsletter loaded with the latest nutrition news and tips.

Reach out to her practice Health Stand Nutrition Consulting for Calgary nutrition counselling on weight loss, diabetes, heart health (high cholesterol and high blood pressure), digestive health (celiac disease and IBS), eating disorders, sports nutrition, family meal planning and more. <http://www.healthstandnutrition.com/personal-nutrition/>.

Contact motivational keynote speaker Andrea Holwegner for more information about corporate wellness, nutrition seminars and about her nutrition and productivity workshops, conference keynotes and health and wellness expertise as professional speaker. <http://www.healthstandnutrition.com/speaking/>.

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