



CARBS ARE NOT THE ENEMY!

Carbs have been getting a bit of criticism lately, and there's no denying that our increasing consumption of processed sugary carbs is linked to the obesity epidemic. But remembering that all fruits & veggies are carbs, what is the story?

Few popular diets ever suggest you eat more carbs. Why is it they get such a bad reputation? There's a huge gap between understanding foods that have healthy qualities (think micronutrients like vitamins and minerals) and foods that play a part in weight/fat loss. While foods are digested differently, almost any food can be part of a weight-loss plan.

That's not an invitation to begin a Hob-Nob diet. Instead, it's context to finding the balance between eating foods you enjoy—like rice or potatoes—and denying yourself everything that might give you pleasure to look good, usually temporarily.

Carb Resistance: It's Real (and Imagined)

The biggest threat is to those with the "my body hates carbs" gene, or allergies. Gluten sensitivity, food allergies, and inflammation make foods such as grains and bread a common enemy.

Even if you don't suffer from any of those problems, you might find that when you eat more carbs, you feel bloated and fat—especially when those carbs come from sugar, candy, or lots of processed gunk.

At the same time, the overreaction to carbs can sometimes be the by-product of a poorly designed diet.

Here's what happens to most dieters:

Step 1: They read that carbs are bad.

Step 2: They remove all carbs.

Step 3: Weight loss occurs within the first one-to-two weeks. Sometimes quite a bit. But fat loss is not a rapid process. (Although it can be for people with lots to lose, like 50 to 100 pounds.) So what's happening? Your body is dropping water weight because carbs hold water (but not necessarily in a bad way).

Step 4: Hunger and frustration builds, focus drops, and energy levels suffer. Eventually, you return to eating carbs after a period (usually about two weeks) of withdrawal. What happens? You might feel bloated, sick, and even see the scale dramatically shift.

The process plays out repeatedly, so let's pump the breaks and solve the carb-sensitivity issue. When you reintroduce carbs after a no-carb period, many things happen in your body. At the most basic level, you're replenishing your depleted carb stores and gaining back the water weight. The end result is thinking, "See, carbs are bad!" Which inevitably begins an ongoing struggle of figuring out what you can eat without being miserable.

The Unfair Truth: Lean People Can Eat More Carbs

How many carbs you can eat and what you can tolerate is based on your body. It's not a sexy answer, but it's the truth.

You can't assume that high-carb diets are bad just as you can't assume that high-protein or high-fat diets are bad. Different types of diets work for different types of people. Part of it is how your body responds and another aspect is less physiological and more psychological. The physiological nature is often controlled by insulin, which, at the most basic level, is a storage hormone.

Very generally, the less body fat you carry, the better your insulin sensitivity, which means you can eat more carbs. (this means that your body doesn't react as aggressively to larger amounts of carbohydrates, often viewed as surging blood sugar.) While insulin is important for weight loss and overall health, it's not a black-and-white situation.

If you are more insulin resistant, it doesn't mean you can't lose weight, but it does have a big impact on the type of diet you should follow. If you're more insulin sensitive (typically lower body fat), your body will respond better to a higher-carbohydrate diet. If you're less sensitive (more resistant), then it can often feel like more carbs will go straight to your gut or your bum. And most of the time, it's not just in your head.

Unfortunately, determining insulin levels isn't an easy process and requires blood work, but you can see how your body reacts to higher-carb meals. The simplest test (although far from perfect) is consuming carbs in a post-workout period. Do you feel great or do you feel miserable and more bloated? If it's the latter, either your insulin sensitivity isn't great or you just ate too much.

A more balanced (and successful) approach is to select a diet and then measure fat loss every two-to-four weeks (but not more frequently). Remember: Fat loss isn't magic. If you think your insulin sensitivity is good, then you can start with 40-50 percent of your diet from carbohydrates. If you're not confident and worried you're resistant—or know you have a lot of weight to lose—begin with about 20 to 30 percent of your calories from carbs.

Don't Forget About Personality

The Paleo diet works for many people, but it's not magic. Rather, removing carbs usually means you're eating fewer calories per day and focusing on a diet that consists of animal proteins, vegetables, and fruits. That's definitely a recipe for success but not everything that is required to drop pounds. Not to mention, if you eat unlimited amounts of anything, you will gain weight.

The bigger issue with a no-carb approach is if it doesn't consider the foods you love. Removing certain foods is one way to structure an eating plan. But if complete withdrawal pushes aggressively against personal preference, you're setting yourself up for failure - what I mean by this is that if I completely cut bread out of my diet, I am miserable, so then I rebel and have like 6 slices of toast!

It is human nature to want a 'this is what you have to do' solution, but you only have to look at the amount of different diets/shakes/detoxes on the market to have half an idea that different things work for different types of people. It's actually part of the problem - we need to stop with the scare tactics and crazy 'cabbage diet' suggestions that might create imbalanced diets that do more harm than good.

How Do You Know Carbs Aren't Really Bad?

There are many things in life we can't yet explain with science. Or many things that science has yet to prove.

However, when science does uncover some truths, it's important they're not ignored. In the case of carbs, insisting that "carbs are bad" isn't a fair conclusion that can be applied to everyone. If you're trying to build muscle, removing all carbs is potentially going to make the process harder too.

The best example is this diet analysis that compared the effects of low-carbohydrate diets and low-fat diets. Researchers found that:

1. Low-fat diets were slightly more effective at lowering total cholesterol and LDL.
2. Low-carb diets were more effective at increasing HDL and decreasing triglycerides
3. NEITHER diet was more effective than the other at reducing body weight, waist girth, blood pressure, glucose, and insulin levels.

This overall lack of differential effects led the report authors to conclude that both low-carb and low-fat diets are viable options for reducing weight and improving metabolic risk factors. One of the strengths of this analysis was its large sample size: It included 23 trials from multiple countries and a total of 2,788 participants, so not a small sample.

What's more, the cuisines of some of the healthiest populations in the world consist of diets that have heavy carbohydrate components. The top 10 countries in the world with the lowest obesity rates all consume a carb-dominant diet.

So where does that leave you? Are you supposed to assume that a high-carb diet only makes Westerners fat? No, but we can use that to better understand and guide our eating habits.

A Practical Approach to Eating Carbs

Saying carbs are OK does not mean you should shovel in bucket-loads of refined flour foods and chase them down with gallons of Coca-Cola (or drink of your choice...). Try to create a diet that's filled with whole and minimally refined foods. Eat more healthy foods (proteins, vegetables, fruits) and less of the stuff you know tastes good but has limited nutritional value (sweets, pop, sugar-loaded foods, and boatloads of pasta).

Finding the right diet for you will take some work - by you, but it's important to remember that it can include carbs. A healthy diet can even include some of the carbs you might not consider healthy—whether bread, grains, and rice, or some sugary dessert every now and then.

The main point is to make the majority of your diet, say 80 to 90 percent, come from the good stuff, and keep the minority to the bad. Or avoid something altogether, if that's your preference or you know that a small taste might open the gateways to a bingeing episode (a trigger food).

Some people will thrive on more carbs, while others will suffer. Your best bet is to play around with food options that are both healthy and work for you. This is the "sustainability diet," and while it's not really a diet (or all that exciting), it is the best approach to dietary success - something that you can live with for the rest of your life.

Experiment and be patient. Find the right balance for your body and let that become the truth when it comes to your dietary stance on carbs and the message we need to spread.

With reference to Adam Bornstein at Born Fitness