

Overview

When eaten, carbohydrate makes blood glucose levels rise. Ninety percent of the carbohydrate we eat enters our blood as glucose within 1-2 hours. For most people with diabetes, the more carbohydrate they eat, the higher their blood glucose rises. Too much carbohydrate can overload the body's insulin supply. However, it's not healthy to avoid carbohydrates, since it is found in many healthy foods. The answer is to eat these carbohydrate-containing foods as part of a balanced meal plan.

How Does A Carbohydrate Counting Meal Plan Work?

When using carbohydrate counting, you are taught how to count your carbohydrate intake at each meal and snack. It is best to work with a dietitian or diabetes educator to learn what is the right amount of carbohydrate for your particular lifestyle and medical history.

How Do You Count Carbohydrate?

Basically, there are two different methods for counting carbohydrates. The first method uses the *Exchange Lists for Meal Planning*. The exchange lists are available from the American Diabetes Association. The starch, fruit, milk and other carbohydrates groups are the sources of carbohydrate. One serving of food from each list contains about 15 grams of carbohydrate, which is called a "carbohydrate" serving. So, if your goal is to have 60 grams of carbohydrate at a meal, you could eat a total of 4 "carbohydrates" – perhaps two servings of starch, one serving of fruit and one serving of milk. The second method for counting carbohydrate is to count carbohydrate grams. In this method, you use food labels and food composition tables to look up the amount of carbohydrate in each food eaten and then total the amount for the entire meal or snack. At first, this method takes more time and effort, but it is also more precise than the exchange system because the exchange system uses averages for carbohydrate contents of foods.

What Are The Benefits of Carbohydrate Counting?

This meal planning method has become more popular over the last several years because it focuses attention on the foods which are most likely to make blood glucose levels go up. This method is also more flexible because you can have different types of foods at meals and snacks just as long as your total carbohydrate intake stays nearly the same. For example, the two lunches below are very different, but they contain about the same amount of carbohydrate and would be equally acceptable on a carbohydrate counting meal plan.

Menu #1

2 slices of bread (30 grams carbohydrate)
2 oz. turkey (zero carbohydrate)
1 tsp. Mayonnaise (zero carbohydrate)
1 small apple (15 grams carbohydrate)

Total: 45 grams carbohydrate

Menu #2

1 c. chicken noodle soup (15 grams carb.)
3 saltine crackers (7 grams carbohydrate)
½ c. tuna salad (zero grams carbohydrate)
1 ½ c. cantaloupe (23 grams carbohydrate)

Total: 45 grams carbohydrate

Finally, in carbohydrate counting, sugar is not forbidden. Occasional sweets are okay as long as you account for the carbohydrate that is in them. However, sweets are not as nutritious as other carbohydrate foods, so they would be eaten only occasionally and only if the blood glucose levels are under good control.

Important Steps to Take

- Work with a dietitian or diabetes educator to develop a carbohydrate counting meal plan that works for you.
- Learn what foods contain carbohydrate and try to eat them in the proper portions at meals and snacks.
- It's possible to eat the right amount of carbohydrate and still eat too much food. This usually happens when you eat large portions of meat and too much fat – both of which contain little or no carbohydrate. Keep an eye on your portion sizes of ALL foods and weigh yourself regularly.