

Diabetes management: Counting your carbs



The food you eat affects your blood sugars. Your health care provider can provide information on a good meal plan for managing your diabetes. There are many approaches to eating for good blood sugar control. Carbohydrate counting is one approach recommended by the American Diabetes Association.

What is a carbohydrate?

Food gives us energy in the form of calories. There are three calorie-containing nutrients in food: fats, carbohydrates and proteins.

Blood sugars do not increase significantly when we eat protein or fat. The key to controlling your blood sugars comes from limiting the carbohydrates in your meal plan. Only carbohydrates are converted directly into blood sugar.

How do I know how many carbohydrates I am eating?

Nutrition labels on food tell you the amount of total carbohydrates for a particular serving size. For foods that do not have nutrition labels, such as fruits and vegetables, you can estimate the number of carbohydrates in them or refer to a carbohydrate-counting book found in your local grocery or bookstore. You can also use a variety of phone apps to look up and record your carbohydrate intake. The American Diabetes Association is another source for this information.

These four food groups contain carbohydrates:



Grains, beans and starchy vegetables (potatoes, corn and peas) group



Fruit group



Milk and dairy group



Sweets and alcohol group
(Small portions of sweets may be consumed as part of the diabetes meal plan and are counted in your carbohydrate total for the day.)

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Did you know?

Carbohydrate counting is a good way to manage your meal plan and control your blood sugars.



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These three food groups do **NOT** contain significant amounts of carbohydrates:



Meat group



Vegetable group



Fat group (This is a concentrated source of calories; limit intake of fats and use canola or olive oil for cooking.)

How many carbohydrates can I eat?

You can help keep your blood sugars from going too high or too low by including carbohydrate foods in each meal throughout the day. It is important to eat three meals per day and space your meals to no more than 4-5 hours apart.

How many carbohydrates you can eat is a very individual thing. The right amount of carbohydrates for you depends on many things, including your level of activity and the medications you take. A dietitian or other health care provider should determine the amount of carbohydrates you need. You might want to start with about 45-60 grams per meal. If snacks are consumed, 15-20 grams of carbohydrates are suggested.

Once you know how many carbohydrates to eat with each meal, you can choose your foods and serving sizes accordingly.

Serving sizes are important. To be more accurate about serving sizes, consider using a food scale to weigh foods, such as fruits and bread, measuring cups for cereal, pasta and rice, and liquid measuring cups for drinks.

Summary

Carbohydrate counting is a good way to manage your meal plan and control your blood sugars. For most people, the key to controlling blood sugars comes from limiting portions of carbohydrate-containing foods and taking medications as prescribed. If you keep your meals within the recommended range and your blood sugars are still not within your target range, see your doctor.

The American Diabetes Association recommends that people with diabetes see a dietitian, certified diabetes educator and doctor regularly. If you would like more information on carbohydrate counting, contact the American Diabetes Association (www.diabetes.org) or ask your doctor for a referral to a registered dietitian specializing in diabetes education.

Healthy meal example

Susan had a turkey sandwich, a small apple and half-pint of 1% milk for lunch. She wants to keep her carbohydrate intake to 45-60 grams total. Let's see how she did.

Food item	Grams
2 slices of bread	30
2 slices of turkey	0
2 teaspoons of mayo	0
½ pint of 1% milk	13
1 small apple	15
Total carbohydrates grams	58