

Diabetes: How to Count Carbohydrates



Carbohydrate is the nutrient that affects blood sugar the most. The more carbohydrate you eat at one time, the higher your blood sugar level will rise. Spreading your carbohydrate out through the day can help you keep your blood sugar levels within a target range. If you take insulin, you can learn to match your dose of insulin to the grams of carbohydrate you eat.

Carbohydrate counting is the best way to plan a diet to control your blood sugar. It will help you feel more in control and give you more confidence in managing your diabetes.

Which foods are carbohydrate?

Carbohydrate comes in two forms:

- Starch (complex carbohydrate). Starch is found in foods such as breads, cereals, and certain vegetables such as potatoes and corn.
- Sugar (simple carbohydrate). Sugar is found in fruits, milk, yogurt, and sweets.

Foods that contain added sugar usually have more total carbohydrate in a serving than foods without added sugar. For example, a serving of fruit canned in syrup will have more carbohydrate than the same serving of fresh

fruit. You can eat foods with sugar when you have diabetes, as long as you keep track of the amount of carbohydrate in them and stay within the amount you need.

What is the daily amount?

A registered dietitian or certified diabetes educator will help you plan how much carbohydrate to include in each meal and snack. Eat at least three meals a day that include carbohydrate. Spreading your carbohydrate all through the day will help keep your blood sugar levels stable.

- Check your blood sugar level before and after you eat. This will show you how the food you eat affects your blood sugar.
- Record what you eat and your blood sugar results in a food record. Review the record with your dietitian or certified diabetes educator at each regular visit and whenever you think your meal plan needs adjusting.
- Eat a balanced diet that includes protein and limits fat. Protein-rich foods include meat and cheese. Ask about how much fat you need.

How do you count carbohydrate?

Most packaged foods have labels that show the carbohydrate for a single serving. Get a guide from the American Diabetes Association. Once you know how much carbohydrate you can have each time you eat, you can use one of two ways to count. Use the method that is easiest for you. For both methods, foods have been grouped and serving sizes have been adjusted so that each serving has 15 grams of carbohydrate.

- **Counting grams.** If you wanted a breakfast with 45 grams of carbohydrate, you could choose three servings with 15 grams in each serving (3 servings x 15 grams per serving = 45 grams). So you could choose one serving each of oatmeal, milk, and half a banana. Or, you could pick three servings of the same food, such as a larger bowl of oatmeal. Or, you could add up the carbohydrate on food labels until you get to 45 grams.
- **Counting servings.** In this point system, 15 grams equals 1 serving or 1 point. Instead of 45 grams of carbohydrate at breakfast, you would count 3 carbohydrate points.

How much carbohydrate is in foods?

The following list is a general guideline for the carbohydrate content of common foods in grams. If you eat a double portion, count it as two servings and count twice as many grams of carbohydrate.

It is important to know what makes a serving or standard portion. When you are first learning to count carbohydrate, it may be helpful to weigh or measure your food.

Check the Nutrition Facts label on packaged or canned foods. It will tell you the amount of carbohydrate in each serving.

Bread, cereal, rice, pasta, and starchy vegetables (Count each serving as 15 grams or as 1 point.)

- 1 slice bread (1 oz) or one small roll
- 1 oz ready-to-eat cereal
- ½ cup cooked cereal
- 1/3 cup pasta, rice or other cooked grain
- ½ cup cooked dry beans, lentils, peas, or corn
- 1 small potato
- ½ cup sweet potato or yam
- 3/4 cup winter squash

Vegetables (5 grams of carbohydrate per serving. These usually do not need to be counted unless you are eating large amounts. Count 3 servings as 15 grams or as 1 point.)

- 1 cup raw leafy vegetables
- ½ cup other vegetables, cooked or chopped raw
- 3/4 cup vegetable juice

Fruits (Count each serving as 15 grams or as 1 point.)

- 1 small apple, 1 medium orange, or half a banana
- ½ cup chopped, cooked, or canned fruit
- ½ cup fruit juice
- ½ cup dried fruit

Milk and yogurt (Count each 1-cup serving as 15 grams or as 1 point). Food with added sugar will contain more carbohydrate. Check the label.

Sweets. The carbohydrate content of sweets varies. It depends on the ingredients. Talk with a registered dietitian about how to work these foods into your diet.