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Carbohydrate Confusion Quality Carbohydrates

Carbohydrates have received a lot of bad press in the last 10 years. They have been attacked by many different fad diets; some encouraging ‘counting carbs’, while others have called for eliminating them altogether! This has been incredibly misleading to the general public since science tells us that carbohydrates (the *right* ones) are necessary for many processes in the body. In an attempt to clear up some of this confusion, I’d like to tell you a little about what carbohydrates are, what they do, and where to find the quality sources that will be better choices for your dinner plate (or breakfast bowl!).

Carbohydrates are one of the two major nutrients we use for energy, fat being the other (protein is not an efficient energy source). When broken down in the body carbohydrates give us glucose—which is used for energy by many cells in the body. In fact, certain cell types like red blood cells, brain cells, and cells in the nervous system are not able to function properly without glucose readily available. If you’ve ever tried to eliminate carbohydrates from your diet you probably noticed a sharp decline in energy and may have noticed that it was a little more difficult to think clearly.

Sugar and fiber are two types of carbohydrates that can tell you a little bit about the quality of a carbohydrate source. Sugar isn’t necessarily bad, but some foods add a lot more sugar than we really need. Fiber doesn’t give energy in the same way that most carbohydrates do, but is very beneficial for health. Research shows that fiber helps to lower blood pressure, improve cholesterol, and reduce inflammation levels.

There is no question that carbohydrates are necessary in a healthy, well-rounded diet, but there are certainly some carbohydrates that are better choices than others. How do we identify the quality carbohydrate choices? To start with, anything without a food label is probably a good choice—here I’m talking about fresh fruits and vegetables. Eating foods as close as possible to their natural state is always a good idea. However, many foods with labels can be high quality choices as well. As you have probably heard, whole grains are important for health. In fact, at least half of the grains you choose should be from whole grain sources (look for ‘whole’ on the label or ingredient list). Many cereals, snacks, and drinks have more refined grains and added sugars. These are going to be missing the some of the fiber and nutrients we can find in whole grain sources, and should be limited.

Paying a little attention to what you’re putting in your grocery cart can have many positive effects on overall health. Look for quality in your carbohydrates and you will reap the benefits. *Kentz Willis, M.S., is the University Extension Educator in Nutrition and Food Safety for Sheridan and Johnson counties. He can be reached via email at kwillis3@uwyo.edu.*