

The Carbohydrate controversy

For years, it was a given that the most heart-healthy diet was low in fat and high in carbohydrates: fruits, vegetables, legumes, grains and other starches. But lately, experts have qualified the high-carb part, saying that overloading on carbohydrates can make you fat—and actually up your risk of heart disease. What now?

So far, many scientists who help set dietary guidelines are holding fast: Carbohydrates, they contend, should still make up the largest share—55 to 60 percent—of our daily calories.

But, there is some alarm about both the quantity and quality of the carbs in our diet. Eat too many, especially too many of the wrong kind, and you may, indeed, be courting heart disease.

Quantity

As to amount, the bottom line is simple: calories. Carbs have plenty of them, yet we tend to dismiss this. "Often, when we cut back on fat, we feel we can eat much larger portions of carbohydrates," says Amy Soccoccia, R.D., a di-

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etician at the WakeMed Heart Hospital in Raleigh, N.C. Not true. Any excess calories we eat—whether from a cream sauce or starchy pasta—is stored as excess fat. And excess body fat makes us more susceptible to heart disease.

Quality

Recent research suggests that the kinds of carbs we eat matter as much as the amounts. "We know that there are good and bad fats," says Simin Liu, M.D., director of nutrition research and assistant professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School. "Similarly, we now know that there are good and bad carbohydrates."

This is not an entirely new concept. Dietary guidelines have long urged eating more complex carbs, such as whole grains, over simple ones, such as sugary foods. But Liu believes that a better measure of a carbohydrate's worth is the glycemic index, a point-system that rates a food on how quickly it sends insulin and blood sugar (glucose) soaring. Carbs with a high glycemic index raise blood sugar and insulin rapidly; those with a low index boost it more slowly, which is healthier.

In the last two years, Liu and his colleagues have linked high-carb diets with a high glycemic index to an increased risk of heart disease—especially in overweight women (recent studies are only following women). They're now looking at whether carbohydrates with a high glycemic index also boost blood pressure and body fat.

Though the work is ongoing and somewhat controversial, many experts are listening.

Does this mean we all have to start carrying a glycemic index chart in our back pockets? Not according to Liu, who believes that there are just two basic ideas we need to remember.

➤First, carbohydrates, such as potatoes, white bread, white rice and other refined or highly starchy foods register highest on the glycemic index. So eat these sparingly. Opt for their whole-grain counterparts instead, like whole-wheat bread and brown rice.

➤Second, rely on fruits, legumes and vegetables for the greater part of your carbohydrate intake. Although the glycemic numbers among fruits and vegetables vary, most are at the lower end of the scale.

Hardly anyone—including those who dismiss the idea that we need to be aware of a carb's glycemic index—would argue with this healthy diet regimen. Fruits, vegetables and whole grains simply supply more vitamins, minerals, phytochemicals and fiber than either their refined or super-starchy counterparts. That alone will help you guard your heart.

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At-A-Glance Guide to Heart-Smart Carbs

Eat abundantly

Fruits and vegetables
Lentils
Dry beans
Air-popped popcorn

Eat moderately

Whole wheat pasta
Brown rice
Wild rice
Whole grain breads
Whole grain cereals

Eat sparingly

Cookies, cakes and candy
Refined bread, bagels, pastas, grains
White rice
Potatoes
Potato chips and similar highly processed carbs

The whole truth about whole grains

New guidelines could make it easier to know which foods contain the healthful grains, but you have to choose carefully nonetheless.

By SALLY SQUIRES
Special to The Times

Your favorite bread, cereal, crackers and pasta could be whole-grain wonders — or merely half-baked. It can be difficult to tell the difference.

In releasing draft guidelines for defining whole grains, the Food and Drug Administration recently moved to make it easier to know what a whole grain is — and how much amounts to a one-ounce serving. That's important because nearly half of Americans never eat whole-grain foods, according to government food surveys, even though the 2005 Dietary Guidelines recommend that most adults eat three one-ounce servings daily.

But the new federal definition may still leave the picture a little unclear for consumers. After all, it's a recommendation, not a regulation.

But choosing with care is worth the effort.

Skip whole grains and you not only miss foods with great flavor — popcorn, oatmeal, shredded wheat, graham crackers and corn tortillas, to name a few — you miss out on important protection against heart disease and some types of cancer.

Plus, whole grains could help your waistline, according to the 2005 Dietary Guidelines Advi-

sory Committee Report. In one large study, for every 40 grams of whole grains — roughly equal to adding three servings daily — body weight decreased in women by about a pound. In another, body mass index was least in those who ate the most whole grains. And in a study that looked at the children of participants of the landmark Framingham Heart Study, those who ate the most whole grains had the lowest body mass index and the smallest waist-to-hip ratios — important predictors of heart disease, diabetes and risk of obesity.

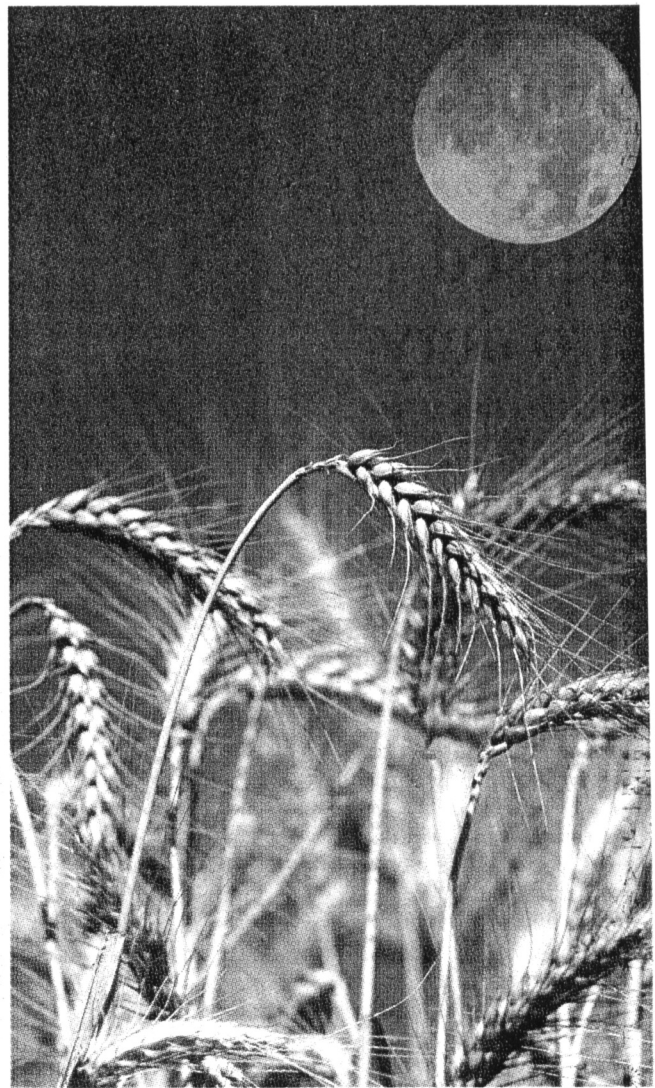
So what gives whole grains their punch? They're packed with minerals and vitamins that are good for the heart, the immune system and the blood, and help protect against neural tube defects including spina bifida in newborns. Whole grains are rich in complex carbohydrates, which is less likely to make blood sugar soar.

And the good news is that they're turning up as ingredients in a growing number of popular foods — Chips Ahoy, raisin bread, English muffins, Rice-a-Roni, Fig Newtons and some, but not all, Wheat Thins. The challenge, says Bonnie Liebman, director of nutrition for Center for Science in the Public Interest, "is you have to know which products are whole grains and which ones aren't."

Here's how you can find more whole grains:

■ **Eyeball the ingredients label.** Look for products that list whole grain as one of the first ingredients. That means whole wheat, whole rye, whole oats, whole corn, whole graham and whole barley. Also, brown rice, wild rice, bulgur, quinoa, sorghum, triticale and amaranth.

■ **What's a serving?** Here's where it can get tricky, because of differences in moisture and formulations of various foods. So a slice of whole-wheat bread equals a one-ounce serving, as does one whole-wheat mini bagel, one small whole-corn tortilla or one whole-buckwheat pancake (about 4.5 inches in diameter). Half a whole-wheat English muffin is also a serving, as is half a cup of cooked oatmeal or whole-wheat pasta. Others are three cups of popcorn or five Triscuits or one cup of Cheerios. (Find a complete list of one-ounce equivalents at *my*



GOLDEN WAVES: Whole grains are packed with minerals and vitamins that are good for the heart and the immune system.

pyramid.gov. Click on "Inside the Pyramid," then on "Grains" and then on "What counts as an ounce?")

■ **Fiber and whole grains are not the same.** They're both measured in grams and they're often found in the same foods, but they're not interchangeable. So if you eat one cup of 100% bran cereal for breakfast, that's a smart high-fiber choice, but it's not whole grain. As part of the new definition, expect to see some food manufacturers tout grams of whole grains on their products. For 100% whole-wheat bread, 16 grams would be considered a one-ounce equivalent.

■ **Foods that can fool you.** De-germinated corn is not a whole grain, which means most corn bread is not made from whole grains. Neither is pearled barley or wheat flour or many products labeled multigrain, cracked wheat and seven-grain. And unless your pizza dough is made entirely from whole-wheat flour, it's not a whole grain either.

■ **Look for help from Whole Grain Stamps.** They're issued by the Whole Grains Council, a non-profit consortium of industry, scientists and chefs. The golden stamps are on more than 600 products that have varying amounts of whole grains.