

Who's Bad?

Michael Jackson's iconic Q might as well have been aimed straight at carbs. We've now been shunning them for two decades—but breaking data shows just how bad-ass the macronutrients could be at fighting off flab.

By Courtney Balestier

Go ahead, utter the C-word—and watch what happens. One gang will say pasta is the devil. The other will cut you with a butter knife if you don't pass the bread basket. We're calling a truce, and not just because carbohydrates are your body's main—and much misunderstood—source of energy. Turns out, they could be a key to weight loss: Eating the right kinds is actually a better strategy for slowing your jellyroll than avoiding them altogether, per a new study. To shed lbs, “the quality of carbs is as important as the quantity—sometimes even more important,” says study coauthor Frank Hu, M.D., Ph.D., of the Harvard School of Public Health. In other words: More carbs can = more slim-down success. Our cheat sheet will help you (insert whispery MJ voice) make that change.



CARB-O-LAND

The rules are pretty simple: The farther you amble down this chart, the more servings of these carbs you can eat. A flat belly awaits at the finish line.

RULE OF TUM

If you're trying to shed a size, unprocessed carbs (everything from fruit on down) should make up 90 percent of all the carbs you eat in a day.



Simple Sugars

Your body breaks them down faster than kitten videos go viral. The problem with that? Overindulging causes blood sugar surges, then crashes, that can make you even hungrier. Plus, research shows simple sugars might be highly addictive, so you end up wanting more, more, more...

Cap it at a tablespoon a day. Sorry, no special passes for treats sweetened with natural stuff like agave or honey. Your bod handles those the same way (there is no God, apparently).



Refined Grains

Processed grains leave your digestive tract out of a job. These guys, which have been stripped of valuable nutrients like fiber and antioxidants, speed through your gut so quickly, you'll be hungry again shortly after eating them.

Have no more than two daily handfuls of refined grains like white rice or pasta. Love linguine with a passion? Serve it with some protein (may we suggest a Bolognese?) that will help decelerate the carb's race through your stomach.

EAT RARELY



Whole Grains

Since they take more energy to turn into, well, energy, your body can't churn and burn 'em like their refined counterparts. Meaning: greater satiety, fewer cravings. (Despite the buzz around ancient grains, they're no more filling than any whole grain.)

Chew up to three servings a day of 100 percent whole grains. People who do so are 76 times more likely to get the most fiber—which has been linked with weight loss. Double score!



Fruit

Fructose, fruit's built-in sugar, makes a pit stop in your liver, a diversion that helps prevent spikes in blood sugar levels. Whole fruit also packs fiber, vitamins, and water that keep you feeling full.

Make fruit no more than two of your five daily servings of produce to avoid OD'ing on sugar, natural or not. And don't confuse fruit fructose with high-fructose corn syrup (HFCS), which is processed up the wazoo and should be avoided. One study found that diets rich in HFCS spell significant weight gain.



Starches

Research reveals a welcome twist on this much-maligned group: It's not carbs like corn or potatoes that do waistline damage, but the degree to which they are processed (fried in oil versus baked).

Don't be afraid to pile taters, corn, or bananas (try the greenish ones) on your plate. All contain resistant starch, which shows major slenderizing promise. Evidence suggests it acts like fiber, slowing digestion, shutting down hunger hormones, and increasing calorie burn.



Legumes

Even though they contain protein and fiber, a lot of diet plans (including paleo) have banished them. In reality, they should be your carb BFFs. One analysis found that people felt 31 percent fuller after eating around one daily cup of legumes.

Get started by swapping ¼ cup cooked beans for an ounce of 85 percent ground beef in burgers; you'll save up to four grams of fat and nearly 30 calories. Then work some into your meals on the reg—peanuts and chickpeas count. ■

COMPLEX CARBS? BETTER BELIEVE IT

And some pseudo-science makes them seem even more complicated.

Heard chatter about the bennies of low-glycemic-index (GI) grub? The 1 to 100 index ranks all carb-containing eats by the effect they have on your blood sugar. The lower the number, the lower the blood sugar spike—and the smaller your resulting cravings. Sounds handy, but GI scores can be misleading. They don't deal in real-life portion sizes, meaning a candy bar—stuffed with simple sugars—can end up with a deceptively low GI but still amp up your appetite (and waistline). Harvard to the rescue (again!). Its scientists came up with the GL, or glycemic load. A more accurate carb-on-blood-sugar measurement, it factors in extra criteria like carb quality. For example, while watermelon has an alarming GI of 72, its GL, 4, shows the bigger, healthier picture. Next time you're unsure about a carb, google its GL (scores below 10 are best).

EAT IN MODERATION

EAT YOUR FILL

RODALE IMAGES (GUMMY CANDY, RICE, GRAPES), EYE-STOCK/ALAMY (BREAD)