



Carbohydrates, Sugar and Your Child

Carbohydrates are the body's most important and readily available source of energy. Even though they've gotten a bad rap in the 2000s and have often been blamed for the obesity epidemic in America, carbs are a necessary part of a healthy diet for both kids and adults.

The two major forms are:

- **simple sugars** (simple carbohydrates), such as fructose, glucose, and lactose, and also found in nutritious whole fruits
- **starches** (complex carbohydrates), found in foods such as starchy vegetables, grains, rice, and breads and cereals

So how, exactly, does the body process carbohydrates and sugar? All carbohydrates are broken down into simple sugars. These sugars are absorbed into the bloodstream. As the sugar level rises, the pancreas releases a hormone called insulin, which is needed to move sugar from the blood into the cells, where the sugar can be used as a source of energy.

The carbohydrates in some foods (mostly those that contain simple sugars and highly refined grains, such as white flour and white rice) are easily broken down and cause your child's blood sugar level to rise quickly. Complex carbohydrates (found in whole grains), on the other hand, are broken down more slowly, allowing blood sugar to rise more gradually. Eating a diet that's high in foods that cause a rapid rise in blood sugar may increase a person's risk of developing health problems like diabetes and heart disease, although these studies have been done mostly in adults.

Despite the recent craze to cut carbs, the bottom line is that not all foods containing carbohydrates are bad for your child, whether they're complex, as in whole grains, or simple carbohydrates, such as those found in fruits. If carbohydrates were such a no-no, we'd have a huge problem, considering that most foods contain them. But, of course, some carbohydrate-dense foods are healthier than others.

Good sources of carbohydrates include:

- whole-grain cereals
- brown rice
- whole-grain breads
- fruits
- vegetables
- low-fat dairy

A healthy balanced diet for children over 2 years should include 50% to 60% of the calories consumed coming from carbohydrates. The key is to make sure that the majority of carbs kids eat are from good sources and to limit the amount of added sugar in their diet.