

The Five Best Carbs for a Flat Belly

brought to you by
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A SAD Story

The acronym representing the Standard American Diet (SAD) is quite fitting, as it is indeed sad how typical Americans (and individuals in the vast majority of developed nations) eat today. According to the USDA, over 63% of the calories consumed by the average American come from processed foods, including added sugars, refined grains, and added fats and oils.

This estimate is likely on the low side, as upwards of half of the calories considered to be plant-based foods (e.g., fruits, vegetables, legumes, nuts & seeds, true whole grains) are processed as well. For instance, almonds in candy bars, apples in apple pie, spinach in frozen entrees, etc., count in this category, although these are clearly a far cry from whole, unprocessed options.

Here are some more sad facts about the Standard American Diet:

- Folks in America and other developed nations are consuming upwards of 150 pounds of sugar per year.
- Consumption of soda, fruit juice, and other sweetened beverages has increased over 135% over the last several decades.
- As mentioned above, processed foods make up approximately 70% of what most folks eat.
- Although estimates vary, calorie intake has increased upwards of 400 calories per day over the last several decades.

Based on the information above, it's unlikely that this increase in caloric intake is the result of eating more vegetables, fruits, and lean meats; more likely, it can be explained by consumption of processed foods and sugar-sweetened beverages.

- Folks have heeded the advice to substitute vegetable oils rich in polyunsaturated fats for animal fats, which are typically higher in saturated fats (e.g., substituting margarine for butter). Unfortunately, this “cornerstone” of worldwide dietary guidelines has turned out to be heavily misguided, as research now demonstrates that substituting vegetable oils rich in omega-6 fatty acids for saturated fats has resulted in “increased rates of coronary heart disease, cardiovascular disease, and death from all causes.”

POINTING The FINGER

Perhaps some good news to come out of all of this is that dietary fat is no longer considered to be the “bad guy.” As a matter of fact, researchers have posited that dietary fat is not a determinant of body fat.

Harvard researcher Walter Willett and his colleagues have found that, despite a substantial decline in the percentage of calories from fat during the last 30 years, there’s a been a corresponding “massive increase” in the prevalence of obesity. Further, Willett says, “Diets high in fat do not appear to be the primary cause of the high prevalence of excess body fat in our society, and reductions in fat will not be a solution.”

Even more, saturated fat is no longer the scapegoat for increasing rates of obesity and chronic disease, as the tables are finally turning in the appropriate direction. Dr. Frank Hu, Professor of Nutrition and Epidemiology at Harvard, set out to answer the question: “Are refined carbohydrates worse than saturated fat?”

Dr. Hu’s research led him to conclude that “refined carbohydrates are likely to cause even greater metabolic damage than saturated fat,” and “the time has come to shift the focus of the diet-heart paradigm away from restricted fat intake and toward reduced consumption of refined carbohydrates.”

Along those lines, in a 2004 epidemiological study, researchers analyzed nearly 90 years worth of data, and they found, “Increasing intakes of refined carbohydrate concomitant with decreasing intakes of fiber paralleled the upward trend in the prevalence of type 2 diabetes observed in the United States during the 20th century.”

It’s becoming increasingly apparent that consumption of refined carbohydrates (e.g., processed flours and the “foods” that are made with them like breads, breakfast cereals, bagels, noodles and pasta, baked goods, crackers, etc.; refined sugars like table sugar and high fructose corn syrup) is closely related to obesity and various forms of chronic illness, including cardiovascular disease and diabetes. In fact, numerous studies have linked consumption of these high-glycemic carbohydrates to obesity.

CrITICAL VArIAbLeS

With all that in mind, it’s easy to see how there’s a shift in thought process to suggest that all carbohydrates are “bad” and that a low-carb diet is the only way to achieve your health, body composition, and performance goals. While low-carb diets may be effective for some folks and/or for certain periods of time, the research does not support that long-term low-carb dieting is more effective than other diets.

In fact, in a paper titled “A Call for an End to the Diet Debates,” scientists scoured the research analyzing numerous randomized trials comparing various diets (e.g., low-carbohydrate, low-fat, Mediterranean). They found that differences in weight loss and metabolic risk factors are small (i.e., a difference of less than 2 pounds) and inconsistent. What did the researchers find to be most important? Adherence.

Specifically, the authors stated, “The only consistent finding among the trials is that adherence—the degree to which participants continued in the program or met program goals for diet and physical activity—was most strongly associated with weight loss and improvement in disease-related outcomes.”

The fact of the matter is that it’s not fair to lump all carbohydrate-dense foods into a single category. In addition to being packed with heavily-refined carbohydrates that rapidly spike blood sugar and insulin, processed foods have been stripped of beneficial micronutrients (e.g., vitamins and minerals), phytonutrients, and fiber.

Simply put, fiber is a nutrition all-star, as it promotes satiety, a healthy digestive tract, regularity, cardiovascular health, and many other health and body composition outcomes. In fact, researchers have linked low fiber intakes to increased risk for diabetes and obesity. What’s more, scientists continuously demonstrate that diets higher in fiber help with weight loss and weight management

Generally speaking, most people will do best with some carbs, with appropriate adjustments made for activity level and body type. A small percentage of the population will do well with a lot of carbs. Likewise, an equally small percentage will thrive with very few carbs. If the image of a bell curve and standard deviations are coming to mind, then you’re on the right track.

Overall, carbohydrate intake should be proportionate to one’s activity levels, whereas protein and fat intake may remain pretty constant relative to one’s body weight or lean body mass. At higher activity levels, more carbohydrates may be necessary, particularly for those individuals who have an ectomorphic frame. For sedentary folks, especially those who are trying to lose fat and/or have more endomorphic body types, fewer carbohydrates may be needed.

While there are plenty of “bad” options out there, as processed carbohydrates are seemingly ubiquitous, it should be increasingly clear that not all carbohydrates are created equally. You don’t have to completely eliminate carbs from your diet to achieve your health, body composition, and performance goals, especially when you choose the best sources. With that in mind, here are five of our top carbs for a flat belly, which will leave you full and satisfied while supporting your body transformation goals.

Berries and Cherries

Berries like blackberries, blueberries, raspberries, and strawberries are nutrientdense, and they are high in both water and fiber, which can help keep you full. What’s more, they’re naturally sweet, which will help satisfy your sweet tooth, and they are low glycemic, which will help you manage your blood sugar and insulin levels.

The health benefits of berries, with their dark pigments indicative of their rich polyphenol content, have been demonstrated in various nutrition studies. Research suggests that these nutritional powerhouses may have cardioprotective effects as well as benefits ranging from aging to metabolic syndrome.

Researchers from Texas Women’s University recently demonstrated that the polyphenols in blueberries may play a significant role in fighting obesity. Specifically, the researchers found that these compounds inhibited the formation of fat cells.

What's more, researchers from New Zealand found that consumption of blueberries may also accelerate muscle recovery when combined with intense exercise. Specifically, subjects who consumed a blueberry smoothie before and after exercise experienced reduced muscle soreness and accelerated recovery of strength, which all adds up to more frequent and more intense training sessions and improved performance.

Anthocyanins, the colorful antioxidant pigments that give berries their red, blue, and purple hues, are well-known for their wide-ranging health effects, including their abilities to help manage blood sugar and improve insulin signaling. Specifically, cyanidin 3-glucoside (C3G), which is a member of the anthocyanin family, has been shown to attenuate insulin resistance and ameliorate high blood sugar, both of which have major implications for combatting obesity and enhancing fat loss.

What's more, anthocyanins have been shown to have a unique effect on fat cells (i.e., adipocytes), which has led authors to state that they may play an intricate role in the prevention of metabolic syndrome. As a matter of fact, researchers investigating the effects of anthocyanins on adipocyte function concluded, "Anthocyanins have a significant potency of antiobesity and ameliorate adipocyte function" and they also have "important implications for preventing metabolic syndrome." From a fat loss and weight management standpoint, that sounds berry good to us!

Mixed Beans

Beans are an excellent plant-based source of protein, and depending on the type, they provide upwards of 12 grams of fiber per 1-cup serving. Dietary fiber and protein are two nutrients that researchers have found to be positively associated with satiety, or feelings of fullness.

Not surprisingly, researchers found that, when human subjects supplemented their regular diet with garbanzo beans daily, they reported significant improvements in satiety, appetite, meal satisfaction, and bowel function. Participants were also found to decrease consumption of snack foods and overall calorie intake. Additionally, researchers from Purdue University found that subjects who added beans to a reduced-calorie diet lost over three times as much weight as the control group, which consumed the same number of calories, over the course of 6 weeks.

What's more, an increase in the hormone cholecystokinin (CCK), secreted in the gut in response to protein and fat intake that helps to slow gastric emptying and increase satiety, has been reported following bean consumption. Thus, in addition to their high protein and fiber content, beans may positively influence appetite by stimulating satiety centers in the brain.

Legumes, including certain beans and lentils, are also a good source of resistant starch, which is a special type of carbohydrate that is not digested by the human body. Resistant starch is not technically classified as a fiber, although many researchers now believe that it should be.

Multiple studies have shown that naturally-occurring resistant starch intake increases satiety and reduces food intake both acutely and in the long-term. Research has also shown that consumption of resistant starch increases fat oxidation (i.e., fat burning). Resistant starch has also been shown to decrease fat storage in adipocytes (i.e., fat cells) and improve insulin sensitivity.

Furthermore, researchers speculate that resistant starch may also increase the thermic effect of feeding, which means that it boosts the metabolism, as well as promote weight loss and preserve fat free mass.

If the weight management benefits aren't enough, regular consumption of beans appears to also possess significant cardioprotective benefits. Specifically, researchers found that eating just one serving daily of pulses, which include beans, lentils, and peas, can significantly reduce "bad" (i.e., LDL) cholesterol and the risk of heart disease.

Scientists from throughout Canada and the US reviewed 26 randomized controlled trials that included 1037 people. Despite variation between studies, the researchers found a 5% reduction in low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol in people who ate one serving (i.e., $\frac{3}{4}$ cup) of pulses per day. Men had greater reduction in LDL cholesterol than women, perhaps because their diets are poorer, cholesterol levels are higher, and benefit more markedly from a healthier diet.

Overall, the research is quite clear that adding 3 – 5 cups (per week) of beans to your diet may have some significant beneficial effects on your body composition as well as your cardiovascular health. There are many options from which to choose, including black beans, dried peas, garbanzo beans, kidney beans, lentils, lima beans, navy beans, pinto beans, and more.

Quinoa

While this "ancient grain" has the taste, texture, and mouth feel of a grain, quinoa is a gluten-free seed, which contains double the protein of brown rice along with greater fiber content and a lower glycemic load.

Not only that, quinoa is the ONLY grain-like food to contain the full spectrum of amino acids, making it a "complete" protein. Quinoa has a unique, nutty taste and chewy texture. It is also high in several antioxidants in the vitamin E family, and it is a good source of the essential nutrients manganese, phosphorus, copper, magnesium, folate, and zinc.

A single $\frac{3}{4}$ cup serving of quinoa packs over 8 grams of complete protein and 5 grams of fiber. This Andean "super food" is such a nutrient-rich superstar, in fact, that the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO) officially declared that the year 2013 be recognized as "The International Year of Quinoa."

In addition to being a good source of essential nutrients, quinoa is also rich in a class of phytonutrients called saponins. In a recent study that appeared in the Journal of Food Science, researchers investigated the anti-inflammatory potential of saponins derived from quinoa, and the scientists found that the saponins suppressed both the production and release of inflammatory chemicals called cytokines. As a matter of fact, the researchers were so impressed that they concluded, "Quinoa saponins may be used as functional food components for prevention and treatment of inflammation."

Quinoa is also plentiful in antioxidants, including quercetin and kaempferol. In fact, the concentration of these two flavonoids in quinoa can sometimes be greater than their concentration of high-flavonoid berries like cranberries.

Quercetin is a particularly interesting antioxidant as it not only scavenges free radicals but may also

help regulate blood sugar. In fact, quercetin has been shown to inhibit enzymes like alpha-amylase and alpha-glucosidase, which are responsible for breaking down carbohydrates into absorbable sugars. In essence, quercetin is a natural “carb blocker,” and it has been shown to effectively suppress blood sugar after a meal.

Although quinoa is just recently gaining mainstream attention, its notoriety is not new, as its nutritional value was recognized as far back as the 1950s. In a 1955 article titled “Edible Seed Products of the Andes Mountains,” researchers including Dr. Philip White made the following pronouncement about quinoa: “While no single food can supply all the essential life-sustaining nutrients, quinoa comes as close as any other in the plant or animal kingdom.”

Quinoa comes in several varieties, including “oatmeal-like” flakes and its whole grain rice-like form. Enjoy it as an oatmeal substitute for breakfast, in salads or casseroles, or as a wholesome whole-grain, high-protein side item to any lunch or dinner meal.

Sprouted Grain Bread

Many people know that processed flours and the foods made from them (e.g., bread, bagels, tortillas, noodles and pastas, baked goods, etc.) are not the best options for optimal health and body composition. These high glycemic, fast-digesting, processed carbohydrates result in elevations in blood sugar and insulin concentrations, blood triglyceride levels, and LDL (i.e., “bad”) cholesterol.

Furthermore, high glycemic, refined carbohydrates, like those found in these foods, are typically void of fiber, and researchers have linked low fiber intakes to increased risk for diabetes and obesity.

What’s more, it’s no secret that high glycemic carbohydrates like these are some of the most fattening ingredients around and closely linked to obesity.

While most understand that this is true for “white” foods, the average whole wheat bread has a similar glycemic index as white bread. Thus, opting for “whole wheat” versions of these foods are still a far cry from the whole, intact grains themselves, and they appear to be a marginal improvement at best.

Sprouted grains, on the other hand, are distinctly different from their traditionally harvested counterparts, and they have many favorable advantages over conventional grains like wheat. What’s more, sprouted grain breads are completely flour-free.

That’s right, you’ll actually be consuming the whole grain. Sprouted grain breads—like those from the folks at Food for Life®—are truly made with whole grains, unlike the vast majority of store-bought breads, which are made from wheat flour. The pulverization of a grain into flour essentially creates a heavily processed carbohydrate, which rapidly enters the blood stream. As mentioned above, fast-digesting carbohydrates result in rapid elevations in blood sugar and insulin levels, which is not an ideal combination for folks looking to lose body fat.

According to the Food for Life® website, here are some of the benefits of sprouted grains:

- Increased digestibility. This should not be confused with increased blood sugar or glycemic response, as it simply means that sprouting makes the digestion process easier on your body resulting in less

inflammation, gas, bloating, etc.

- Increased absorption of minerals. Sprouting grains increases the activity of phytase in plants. This is important because phytase is a naturally-occurring enzyme in plants that breaks down phytic acid, which is known as an “antinutrient” because of its ability to inhibit the absorption of key minerals (e.g., iron, calcium, magnesium, copper, and zinc) in humans. Conventional whole wheat, on the other hand, is rife with phytic acid, which can bind these minerals and prevent you from absorbing them.
- Increased antioxidants.
- Increased vitamin C.
- Increased B vitamins (e.g., B2, B5, and B6).
- Great source of fiber. Because these sprouted grains are not ground down into a fine flour, the whole grain remains intact, including the fibrous bran component. A single slice of sprouted grain bread contains 50% and 200% more fiber than its whole wheat and white counterparts, respectively.
- Source of complete protein. Generally speaking, grains are not a complete source of protein.

However, sprouted grains overcome this limitation, as they provide the full spectrum of essential amino acids that your body needs, and the proteins are rated nearly as efficient as those from animal sources like milk and eggs.

Of course, any conversation involving wheat-based products ultimately leads to the discussion of gluten, a protein inherent to wheat that may cause sensitivities, digestive discomfort, fatigue, depression, headaches, eczema, and you guessed it, difficulty with weight management.

Along these lines, sprouted grain breads use a variety of gluten-free grains, and as a result, including significantly fewer gluten-containing grains (e.g., sprouted wheat and barley). What’s more, the sprouting process, which is similar to fermentation, has been found to substantially reduce gluten proteins. While perhaps not completely glutenfree, sprouted grain breads are significantly lower in their gluten content.

Thus, you don’t give up the bread to achieve your body transformation goals, just choose the right kind. Food for Life® has an entire line of food products—including breads, cereals, wraps, and more—that have been certified as Low Glycemic by The Glycemic Research Institute.

In addition to sprouted grains, other minimally-processed, intact whole grains are also good carbohydrate choices, including whole or steel-cut oats; wild, brown, or red rice; amaranth; buckwheat groats; kamut or spelt grains; maize; millet; and barley.

Vegetables Yes, your mother and grandmother were always right, and it should be no surprise to see vegetables make the list of the best carbohydrate foods. Packed with vitamins, minerals, phytonutrients, and fiber, it’s no secret that a diet plentiful in vegetables confers many health benefits. According to the United States Department of Agriculture, eating a diet rich in vegetables may:

- Reduce the risk of heart disease, including heart attack and stroke;
- Protect against certain types of cancers;

- Reduce the risk of obesity and type 2 diabetes;
- Lower blood pressure; and
- Help decrease bone loss.

While consuming a diet high in vegetables is associated with lower risks for numerous chronic diseases, the impact of eating vegetables on weight management has not been as widely researched.

However, recent studies indicate that higher consumptions of vegetables during weight loss efforts are correlated to more weight and fat lost.

What's more, scientists have found that reduced-calorie diets including five servings of vegetables per day can lead to sustained weight loss, with associated reductions in cardiovascular disease risk factors.

Further, consuming a higher proportion of calories as vegetables may support greater weight loss.

According to the National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion Division of Nutrition and Physical Activity (49), there are multiple reasons why a diet higher in vegetables may help folks control energy balance and support healthy body weight management:

- To lose weight, a person must eat fewer calories than what s/he burns (i.e., negative energy balance).
- People may not limit what they consume based on calories alone. Satiety (i.e., feeling full) is a major reason that people stop eating. Rather than the calorie content of food, short-term studies indicate that the volume of food people eat at a meal is what makes them feel full and stop eating.
- At the same calorie level, foods with low energy density provide a greater volume of food, which may help people feel full at a meal while consuming fewer calories.
- Water and fiber increase the volume of foods and reduce energy density. In their natural state, vegetables have high water and fiber content and thus are low in calories and energy density.
- Vegetables are good substitutes for foods of high energy density.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of Americans don't consume enough vegetables. In fact, only 1 in 4 adults eats the recommended amount of vegetables each day.

More and more research has demonstrated that in addition to the micronutrients (e.g., vitamins and minerals) packed into vegetables, there are also important phytochemicals (i.e., plant chemicals) that are essential for optimal physiological functioning.

Each of the various "color" groups of vegetables offers unique phytonutrients :

- Greens: isothiocyanate, lutein, zeaxanthin, isoflavones, flavonoids, coumestans
- Reds: lycopene, ellagic acid, caffeoylquinic acids, hydroxybenzoic acids

- Oranges: alpha-carotene, beta-carotene, hesperetin, beta-cryptoxanthin, flavonols, terpenoids, phtalides
- Whites: flavonols, allicin, quercetin, sulfides
- Purples: anthocyanins, resveratrol, hydroxycinnamic acids

With that said, it's best to consume a variety of vegetables, as deficiencies in any color group can increase the risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer, and more. To optimize health and body composition, it's recommended to eat at least one cup of each color every day, and the great news is that you have a laundry list from which to choose:

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|--------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| • Asparagus | • Carrots | • Garlic |
| • Beets | • Cauliflower | • Green beans |
| • Bell peppers | • Celery | • Kale |
| • Bok choy | • Collard greens | • Leaks |
| • Broccoli | • Cucumbers | • Mushrooms |
| • Brussels sprouts | • Eggplant | • Onions |
| • Cabbage | • Fennel | • Romaine lettuce |
| • Squash | • Tomatoes | • Turnip greens |
| • Spinach | • Sea vegetables | |

With all that in mind, it's time to heed the advice of your mother and grandmother: Eat your veggies!

WrAPPINg IT UP

As you should be able to see by now, carbohydrates are not created equally, and you need not necessarily eliminate all carbohydrates to achieve your health and body composition goals. The best carbohydrates for a flat belly are those that are unprocessed and slow digesting. These sources of carbohydrates are highest in micronutrients and fiber, enhance satiety, help manage blood sugar and insulin levels, improve health markers, increase energy levels, and optimize body composition.

Even so, it's a good idea to add protein to meals containing these carbohydrates. Protein boosts the metabolism and increases satiety. What's more, consuming protein with carbohydrates slows gastric emptying, which in turn reduces the speed at which sugar is released into the bloodstream. Not only that, protein consumption causes the release of the hormone glucagon, a fat-fighting hormone well known for its ability to counteract the effects of insulin.

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