

Why doesn't Diabetes New Zealand promote low carbohydrate diets?



Diabetes
New Zealand

'I've followed a low carbohydrate diet for a few months and my blood glucose levels have never been better. I used to eat 10 slices of bread each day but now fill up on protein and fat instead. I feel full for longer without the high blood glucose levels I once had. My daughter is also finding this a helpful way to control her weight. Why doesn't Diabetes New Zealand promote low carbohydrate diets? New Zealand registered dietitian Alison Pask answers.

This is a logical question. After all, foods containing carbohydrate convert to glucose and this increases your blood glucose levels after a meal. So the fewer carbohydrates, the lower the blood glucose levels.

However, it is important to look at the big picture. Severely restricting carbohydrates means giving up foods that are major sources of important nutrients.

Carbohydrate foods

As well as in bread, carbohydrate is found in cereals, rice, legumes, pasta, starchy vegetables, milk products and fruits which provide specific vitamins, minerals, fibre and antioxidants.

Eating more protein and fat may increase your risk of heart disease in the long term. Should you choose to continue this pattern of eating, I recommend asking your doctor to monitor your cholesterol. It's also wise to visit a dietitian to ensure you are receiving adequate nutrients for good health.

Eat some carbohydrate but not too much

Take a close look at the foods you are eating now. Is it really a low carbohydrate diet or is it simply lower than what you were previously eating?

Perhaps you used to eat too much carbohydrate. Many people could benefit if they ate less. Carbohydrate restriction is necessary for people with diabetes and you need to establish the amount with your health care team.

Recent research shows low carbohydrate diets do help some people to lose weight in the short term. However, after one year the benefits are no different than for those who have used more conventional weight loss diets.

There are some risks involved with low carbohydrate diets and they are certainly not recommended for growing children.

When it comes to weight loss, it's the long term weight loss and maintenance that are important rather than how quickly or how much weight is lost initially.

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Some general guidelines

- Ask your dietitian to help you establish the recommended amount of carbohydrate for your own personal needs. This will depend on your weight, activity levels, medication, medical history and your overall diabetes control.
- You may find it helpful to start counting the grams of carbohydrate you eat at each meal. Carbohydrates can quickly add up if you don't take note of what you are eating.
- Spread your carbohydrate foods evenly throughout the day.
- Eat smaller portions. Simply eating less can improve your blood glucose levels.
- Be physically active. The more you move the less insulin your body requires.

To summarise

You can improve your blood glucose level by:

- Eating a variety of wholegrain and unprocessed foods
- Balancing the amount of carbohydrate you eat throughout the day
- Being physically active
- Taking your medication as prescribed
- If you are overweight, small weight losses can lower your blood glucose by reducing your insulin resistance.

A low carbohydrate diet may work for some people. However, such a diet needs to be carefully managed and is not the answer for most people with diabetes.