

Carbohydrates

Got Calcium?

Our last article discussed the Atkins diet and the fact that a low carbohydrate, high protein and fat diet usually results in weight loss. We also discussed some of the potential problems with this type of diet, such as dizziness, fatigue, constipation, and possibly high cholesterol, kidney damage in diabetics, kidney stones and vitamin deficiency, if the diet is followed for a long period of time. On balance we concluded that carbohydrates are an essential part of everyone's diet, whether trying to lose weight or not, and that they should not be limited in favor of high amounts of fats and protein. But aren't carbohydrates high in calories? Don't they make you gain weight? How can I lose weight if I don't cut out sweets and starches? The answer lies in the fact that not all carbs are created equal. Carbohydrates are divided into two types, simple and complex. Simple carbohydrates, also called sugars, are made up of single or double glucose molecules. Sucrose (table sugar) and fructose (fruit sugar and honey) and milk sugar (lactose) are examples. Complex carbohydrates are also known as starches. Examples are whole grains, rice, potatoes, pasta, bread, beans and peas. These carbohydrates are made up of long chains of glucose molecules arranged in different ways, and all require much more time and complex metabolism to digest. Ultimately all carbohydrates are broken down into glucose, the major source of energy for all organ function. However simple carbs are metabolized quickly, and cause the blood sugar to go up rapidly, while complex carbs take longer and cause a slower rise in blood sugar. This is obviously important in diabetics, in whom high blood sugar is a major problem. But it's also important in non-diabetics; a rise in blood sugar usually results in a rise in certain blood fats, which in turn may result in a predominance of a type of cholesterol that is particularly damaging to arteries. The complex carbohydrate foods have another advantage: they usually are high in fiber. High fiber diets not only improve bowel function and lower cholesterol, they give a feeling of a satisfied appetite. They also frequently are high in essential vitamins, especially B and E. Simple sugars on the other hand are essentially calories only without any other nutritional value. So how much carbohydrate should we eat when trying to lose weight? Most experts still agree that a healthy diet should consist of 55-60% carbohydrates calories, less than 30% fat calories, and the rest protein, about 20%. Obviously the carbs should be complex, like beans, pasta and whole grain breads and cereals; simple carbohydrates should be avoided. The bottom line still hasn't changed: you have to burn up more calories than you eat if you want to lose weight. A calorie is still a calorie, whether you get it from a steak or a potato. The important thing is to maintain good health while trying to lose weight. This means not subjecting your body to any conditions that would be unhealthy under normal circumstances, especially including excess amounts of one type of food, or deficiencies of another. By the way, lean steak has about 2 ½ times as many calories per ounce as a potato. For more reliable information on nutrition and weight loss visit the Mayo Clinic nutrition web site at www.mayohealth.org and click on Nutrition.