Ultimate Guide to Quality Carbs

Many people have heard about the ‘miracle cure’ of a low-carb diet for diabetes. Some studies show some promise of these diets in the short term (less than six months), but we do not know the safety or effectiveness of these beyond that time frame. Currently, the strongest evidence shows that the best diet plan is one that you can stick with.

In fact, by cutting down completely on carbs (anything less than 130g/day), would mean your brain doesn’t have enough energy to function and you may end up having concentration problems. It could also lead to hypoglycaemia, constipation, and poor compliance in the long-term. We now know, through the research that has been done, that whole grains, fruits and starchy vegetables are for whole health. The benefits of eating these include reduced risk of heart disease, stroke, diabetes, heart disease, and colorectal cancer.

You may already be familiar with carbohydrate counting in diabetes control. Indeed, controlling your quantity of carbohydrate (rather than avoiding it) is one of the most important factors to controlling your blood sugar levels. When it comes to the quality of carbohydrates, it may not be that easy to always know which one to pick. Only some whole grain options have the Healthier Choice Symbol.

Perhaps your whole family has grown tired of brown rice and eating wholemeal bread every day. If you are looking for more variety, here are some ideas to show you the many healthy carbohydrates to spice up your culinary repertoire. We cover the carbohydrate staples in this article, but do remember that there are also other sources of carbohydrates such as fruit, milk/yoghurt, breakfast cereals, and sugar.

Glycaemic Index (GI)

It’s important to know that each person reacts to carbohydrates in a different way, so you can test different foods with a glucometer. The GI also depends on cooking time, what you eat the meal with, ripeness as well as manufacturing methods.

Overall, if you have a balanced meal with vegetables, protein and a controlled carbohydrate portion, the total Glycaemic Load of the meal will be more or less similar whether you choose different GI carbohydrates. As a general rule though, whole grains have usually lower GI than refined grains. There are some exceptions, which may possibly be due to longer cooking time with whole grains. This does not mean you should buy refined grains, as GI is not the most important factor in the nutritional value of carbohydrates. Whole grains have a whole rainbow of antioxidants, fibre, minerals and vitamins from the germ and bran that refined grains lack. Whole grain’s benefits extend beyond blood sugar control, including satiety and prevention of cancer or cardiovascular disease.

Natural Whole Grains

Soaking these whole grains in water overnight makes them less chewy and nicer to eat.
### Rice
Whole grain rice is nuttier and more complex tasting than white with five or more times the fibre. Pre-soak and add in just a bit to cook with white rice if you’re not used to it yet.

#### Parboiled Rice
Parboiling drives micronutrients like thiamine from the bran to the endosperm, making parboiled white rice ~80% nutritionally similar to brown rice, but it is stripped of the bran and germ. Although parboiled rice is healthier than white rice, brown rice is still better.

Parboiled rice has a slightly lower GI than brown rice, but it has about the same amount of fibre as white rice, which means it only has half the fibre of brown rice.

### Spinach/Tomato/Rainbow Noodles
These may be colourful and have a bit of vegetable extract added, but they are not the best choice because most of them are still made from refined flour.

### Breads & Wraps
When shopping, look out for names or the list of ingredients with the words ‘whole grain, wholemeal (U.S.), or whole-wheat (Canadian)’. These essentially mean the same thing (all types of whole grains).

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<tr>
<th>BROWN BASMATI RICE</th>
<th>BUCKWHEAT</th>
<th>OATS</th>
<th>JOB’S TEARS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Although white basmati rice is considered ‘better’ than white Jasmine rice because of its lower GI, brown basmati rice is even better as it has double the fibre and iron!</td>
<td>Soft and mellow, it is great in French crepes or soba. If using as a rice substitute, coat them in egg or oil and toast in a pan before adding water or try boiling with milk as an oatmeal alternative.</td>
<td>Full of soluble fibre that lowers cholesterol and blood sugars. Instead of instant oats, go for steel cut, or second best, rolled oats. They release sugars more slowly into the blood.</td>
<td>It is a typical addition to Chinese stock; don’t throw away this healthy grain! Take it instead of rice for a high protein carbohydrate.</td>
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<th>BLACK RICE</th>
<th>RED CARGO RICE</th>
<th>BARLEY</th>
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<td>This has three times the fibre and requires less cooking time than brown rice. Black rice contains slightly fewer calories, fewer carbs and more protein than either brown or white rice.</td>
<td>Contains anthocyanins to give a red bran. With similar fibre to brown rice, but two times the iron and six times more zinc. It needs less soaking and cooking time than brown rice.</td>
<td>The pearl barley sold in Singapore is not whole grain. Look for “hulled” or “whole” barley. It has a chewy bite and lends a silky texture. Delicious in salads, soups, porridge and stews.</td>
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SPECIAL FEATURE
Bonnie Lau

Starchy Vegetables
These are substitutes for whole grains when you want a change. As starchy vegetables have carbohydrates, you may need to reduce (or replace) whole grain portions if you are having a lot. If you are having potatoes, enjoy them with the skin to get extra benefits from the fibre and potassium.

As a simple guideline, aim for one fist-sized portion of any carbohydrate (whole grain or starchy vegetable) at each meal to keep your blood sugars stable.

Each portion listed below contains 15g carbohydrates (equivalent to one ‘carbohydrate exchange’; for example, one-quarter bowl rice or 1 slice bread), so you can interchange between each of these.

The truth is, there is no ‘one’ best carbohydrate, and that is why we recommend a variety to get the benefits of all of them. Have fun with this guide, mixing and substituting, and enjoy the splendid variety!

Lotus root
3 pieces (egg size)

Chestnuts
3 large pieces

Potato
½ medium or ½ cup

Beetroot
6 slices

Yam / huai shan
½ cup, 1/3 piece or 2 long slices

Sweet potato
½ medium or ½ cup

Corn
½ cob or ½ cup

Pumpkin or carrots
1 cup

Legumes / lentils
(e.g. dhall, kidney beans, edamame, chickpeas or hummus),
lotus seed
½ cup cooked

Peas
2/3 cup cooked

Tapioca pearls/sago
2 tablespoons dry or 1/3 cup cooked

Parsnip
½ cup

About the author: Bonnie Lau is an accredited dietitian who worked at Singapore General Hospital and Tan Tock Seng Hospital before her present job at Glycoleap. She believes in empowering patients/clients to take greater control of their own health while enjoying food. (www.glycoleap.com)