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Carbohydrates

Information if you have diabetes and do not take insulin

Please note: This is general information and should not replace any personalised advice given to you by your healthcare team.

What is carbohydrate and why does it matter?

Carbohydrate (also known as '**carb**' or 'carbs') is part of many foods. It is one of the main food groups, along with fat and protein. When you eat most types of carb, your body digests it and turns it into simple sugars. One simple sugar is glucose, which your body uses for energy.

Glucose is the sugar that the doctor/nurse measures with an HbA1c blood test and which some people measure with a finger-prick test. Your body needs insulin to process the glucose properly. Having diabetes means that your body cannot always give you enough insulin. This is why your body needs you to regulate what you eat.

If you want to understand your blood-glucose levels, then understanding carbs can help.

Which foods are carbs?

Carbs can be either sugar or starch. Both will affect your blood glucose levels. Many foods contain carbs but the main ones are:

- Bread
- Rice
- Pasta
- Potato
- Breakfast Cereal
- Flour
- Oats
- Beans & lentils
- Sugar, honey & syrup
- Fruit & fruit juice
- Milk, yoghurt & ice cream
- Sweets & chocolate
- Puddings, cakes & biscuits

Carbohydrates are recommended as part of a healthy balanced diet.

What to do with information about carbs:

Here are some things you can do to help your body get the best blood glucose levels:

- Aim to keep the amount of carb you eat consistent. Avoid challenging your body with lots of carb in one go or by going for long periods of time without carb.
- Use something like a tea cup or ladle to serve your potato/rice/pasta so that you can keep track of your portion size
- Be as active as you can. Activity helps your insulin to work – even housework, gardening or walking.
- Try to eat lots of fruit and vegetables, aiming for at least five portions a day. As fruit contains carb, remember to spread out your portions over the day.
- Be aware that carbs can add up!

Example - A lunch of a sandwich (2 slices bread), packet of crisps (grab bag), yoghurt (standard) and banana adds up to a big carb portion.

Try swapping some of the carb foods for lower-carb options or reducing the portion size: half a sandwich (1 slice bread), packet of crisps (multi-pack size) and yoghurt (diet or light) with an orange as a snack a couple of hours later.

If your finger-prick test or HbA1c is **high**, you probably need to eat less carb. If you don't think you can eat less carb, contact your diabetes doctor or nurse because your diabetes medication may need increasing. Never cut out carb altogether; a carb-free diet is not recommended.

Try these things:

- Look at the starch portions of your cooked meals and try having $\frac{1}{4}$ or $\frac{1}{3}$ less
- Try thin-sliced bread/small roll instead of thick-sliced bread/large roll. Add lettuce, tomato or cucumber to make the filling bigger so you still have a good meal.
- Swap some of your carb foods for low-carb foods so that you have less carb over-all at your meals/snacks (a low-carb snacks list is available – please ask)

Hypoglycaemia (Hypos)

A hypo is a blood glucose level lower than 4mmol/l. If you are using only diet or Metformin as your treatment, you are very unlikely to 'go hypo' and you should not need to snack. If you use other diabetes medications you can go hypo if the balance between carbs, activity and medication is not right. It is important to treat hypos quickly but it is best to avoid them in the first place.

- If you have hypos, please contact your diabetes team for advice on how to avoid them
- If you often have to eat extra just to avoid hypos, please speak to your diabetes dietitian
- For advice on treating hypos effectively, contact Diabetes UK or your diabetes team

Useful contacts:

If you have questions, please ask a diabetes dietitian or Diabetes UK.

Dorset County Hospital Diabetes Centre
Dorset County Hospital Dietitians

Tel: **01305 255211**

Tel: **01305 254415**

Email: **dietetic.secretary@dchft.nhs.uk**

Diabetes UK Careline

Tel: **0345 123 2399** (charges apply)

Email: **careline@diabetes.org.uk**