

■ HEALTH

DESPITE WHAT YOU THINK, CARBS AREN'T THE ENEMY

Carbohydrates are not only beneficial, but essential to the functioning of a healthy body

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CARBOHYDRATES are one of the main types of macromolecules that your body needs to function properly. They're found in fruit and vegetables, pasta, bread, legumes, dairy products and any foods containing sugar. Carbs have been blamed for everything from the obesity epidemic to our sky-rocketing rates of diabetes and heart disease.

But are carbs really the enemy?

Tirsa Bezuidenhout, a registered dietitian and Association For Dietetics in SA (Adsa) spokesperson,

answers all our questions about carbs, and gives us tips on how to make them work.

WHY DO PEOPLE THINK THAT CARBS ARE THE ENEMY?

Carbohydrates are considered to be "the enemy" because of their association with weight gain and lifestyle diseases (including diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, kidney failure and even certain types of cancer).

This is mainly due to the prominent role which starch (read refined and processed starch) and



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sugar have played in the modern Western diet, which many nations have adopted as their norm.

Starches are indeed one source of carbohydrates (amylase and amylopectin, among others), but fructose (found in fruit), lactose (found in dairy), and even fibre are other examples of carbohydrates which are not only beneficial, but in most cases, essential to the functioning of a healthy human

body.

The fact is that the type and amount of carbohydrates consumed are the key determinants in whether a carbohydrate is healthy or not.

HEALTHY CARBS

Bezuidenhout says naturally occurring and unprocessed carbohydrates are the healthiest to consume: they usually have lower amounts of carbohydrates per

portion; have more fibre and require more energy for digestion and absorption.

UNHEALTHY CARBS

Unhealthy carbohydrates usually refer to refined or processed carbohydrates.

Complex carbohydrates contain many important nutrients: fibre, B vitamins, magnesium and iron, to name a few.

They require more energy to be digested and absorbed, which is important for maintaining an energy balance.

They make meals more satiating and prevent hunger pangs.

The fibre in these carbohydrates (found in starch, fruit and vegetables) supports the digestive system and is involved in the effective control of glucose and cholesterol levels, as well as blood pressure.

It is no myth that unhealthy carbohydrates encourage sugar cravings, cause lethargy and feelings of constant hunger and contribute to the "spare tyre" around our waist, but the opposite is true of complex carbohydrates.

Bezuidenhout says it's important to note that carbs have a bad rap because the wrong representatives have been filling our plates: from big bowls of sugar-laden cereal to sandwiches topped with sugar-containing fillings; refined and sugar-packed snacks and "comfort" meals that do anything, but comfort in the long term, we should redefine the carbs that have pride of place in our diets and embrace them as one piece of the very large puzzle that makes up healthy and enjoyable meals.