

Carbohydrate counting: a quick guide

What are carbohydrate foods?

Carbohydrate foods, or carbs, are a source of fuel and nutrients for your body.

Carbs are:

- » **Sugars**, such as the natural sugar in fruit and milk or the added sugar in soft drinks and many packaged foods.
- » **Starches**, including grains such as wheat, rye, barley, oats, rice and other grains, foods made from these grains such as breads, pasta and breakfast cereals, starchy vegetables such as corn and potatoes; and dried beans, lentils, and peas.

Why is the amount of carbohydrate you eat important?

Once in the stomach, carbs get broken down into glucose, which raises your blood glucose levels. Therefore:

- » Eating or drinking large amounts at one time can lead to high blood glucose levels.
- » Eating too little, or skipping a meal can lead to low blood glucose levels, known as hypoglycaemia (a hypo). This can occur if you are on insulin or certain other diabetes medications.

How to count carbohydrates

Counting carbs is simply keeping track of the amount you eat in your meals, snacks, and drinks across the day.

An exchange, has around 15 grams of carbs.

1 exchange
=
15 grams of carbohydrate



How much should you eat?

This depends on your age, gender, weight and activity levels.

As a general guide:

	Carbohydrate grams (g) at main meals	Exchanges
Women	30g - 45g	2-3
Men	45g - 60g	3-4

Do you need to eat snacks?

Most people who need to take insulin or other glucose-lowering medications do not need snacks through the day or before bed to prevent a hypo. However, for some people a snack may be recommended. Please talk to your diabetes health professional about whether this applies to you.

If you wish to include snacks in your meal plans, please talk to your dietitian about how to best do this.

For adults requiring a carb snack, a general guide is to aim for 1–2 carb exchanges per snack (15–30g of carbs).

Sample meal plan

Here is an example of what carb counting looks like. Each meal has three (3) exchanges and each snack has one (1). The carb foods are in **bold**.









Meal	Food	Carbohydrate Exchanges
Breakfast	½ cup natural muesli with 250ml low-fat milk	3
Snack	1 small banana	1
Lunch	2 slices wholegrain bread with ½ cup baked beans	3
Snack	1 medium apple and 30g unsalted raw nuts	1
Evening meal	100 grams of grilled skinless chicken/lean meat/tofu, stir-fried with ginger, garlic and 2 cups mixed vegetables, served with ¾ cup basmati rice *	3
Snack	½ cup low-fat natural yoghurt (125g) with ½ cup berries	1

* One exchange of cooked rice can range from ¼ to ⅓ cup depending on the type of rice and the way it is cooked and packed.

Carbohydrate exchanges

Here are exchanges of foods that have around **15 grams of carbohydrate**. Use as a general guide only.

Bread and bread products

			
1 regular slice of bread/fruit bread	½ bread roll	½ English muffin	¼ bagel
			
2-4 medium multigrain crispbreads	1 crumpet – round shape	½ pita 'pocket' bread	1 small roti (about 15cm diameter) (40g)






• ½ wholegrain wrap

• ¼ large pita bread

Breakfast cereals

				
½ cup raw rolled oats	¼ cup natural muesli	1½ wheat biscuit type cereal	½ cup flake type cereal with dried fruit	¾ cup porridge (oats cooked with water)





Rice/pasta/grains/flour

				
1/2 cup cooked pasta	1/3 cup cooked noodles (rice/egg/soba/vermicelli)	1/4 cup cooked rice*/couscous	1/3 cup cooked barley/bulgur	2 tablespoons flour/corn flour/raw polenta
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 tbsp dry semolina 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1/2 roll sushi general • 1/2 cup cooked quinoa/millet/buckwheat groats 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1/2 cup chickpea or soy flour 		






Starchy vegetables

		
1 small potato (100g) or 1/2 cup mashed	1/2 cup orange sweet potato, uncooked (100g)	1/2 cup sweet corn kernels (90g) or 1 medium cob (170g)






Legumes

			
1/2 cup cooked/canned bean mix including chickpeas, kidney beans, cannellini beans, baked beans	3/4 cup cooked or canned lentils (140g)	1/2 cup red beans/mung beans	3/4 cup soya beans, dried
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 medium falafel (120g) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1/2 cup or 6 tablespoons hummus (125g) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1/4 cup uncooked lima beans (45g) 	

Fruit

				
1 medium apple or pear (150g)	1 small or 1/2 large banana (130g)	2 medium mandarins (150g)	1 1/2 cups diced rockmelon or watermelon or honeydew (250g)	1/2 cup grapes (100g)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 large apricots (170g) • 2 kiwifruits (170g) • 4 dates, dried and pitted (20g) • 1 large grapefruit (300g) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10 lychees (100g) • 1 1/2 tablespoons or 20 sultanas (25g) • 6 prunes (50g) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6 pieces dried apple (20g) • 2-3 strips dried mango (20g) • 1 cup, or 20 cherries/blueberries/canned fruit (drained) (150g) • 1 cup diced papaya (250g) 		

Milk/milk products/alternatives

				
1 cup low- or full-fat milk or soy milk (250ml)	250g low- or full-fat natural yoghurt	100g low- or full-fat fruit yoghurt	½ cup low-fat custard	½ cup evaporated skim milk

Other/miscellaneous food



3 cups air-popped corn (25g)

Occasional foods

				
1 tablespoon jam	3 teaspoons honey	3 teaspoons sugar	1 cup (30g) potato chips	4 squares milk chocolate (25g)

- 1 small piece of cake, unfilled, without icing (30g)
- 2 tablespoons chocolate drinking powder
- 3 tablespoons or 1/4 cup tomato sauce (65g)
- 1 medium scoop of plain vanilla ice-cream (70g)

Find a dietitian

If you have any questions, ask your dietitian. To find one, go to dietitiansaustralia.org.au or contact Dietitians Australia. Call 1800 812 942 or email info@dietitiansaustralia.org.au

Carbohydrate counting is a tool to better manage your diabetes.

The NDSS and you

A wide range of services and support is available through the NDSS to help you manage your diabetes. This includes information on diabetes management through the NDSS Helpline and website. The products, services and education programs available can help you stay on top of your diabetes.