

'Naked carbs' and 'net carbs'—what are they and should you count them?

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According to [social media](#), carbs come in various guises: naked carbs, net carbs, complex carbs and more.

You might be wondering what these terms mean or if all carbs are really the same. If you are into "carb counting" or "cutting carbs", it's important to make informed decisions about what you eat.

What are carbs?

Carbohydrates, or "carbs" for short, are one of the main sources of [energy](#) we need for brain function, muscle movement, digestion and pretty much everything our bodies do.

There are two classifications of carbs, [simple and complex](#). Simple carbs have one or two sugar molecules, while complex carbs are three or more sugar molecules joined together. For example, table sugar is a simple carb, but starch in potatoes is a complex carb.

All carbs need to be broken down into individual molecules by our digestive enzymes to be absorbed. Digestion of complex carbs is a much slower process than simple carbs, leading to a more gradual blood sugar increase.

Fiber is also considered a complex carb, but it has a structure our body is not capable of digesting. This means we don't absorb it, but it helps with the movement of our [stool and prevents constipation](#). Our good gut bacteria also love fiber as they can digest it and use it for energy—important for a healthy gut.

What about 'naked carbs'?

"Naked carbs" is a popular term usually used to refer to foods that are mostly simple carbs, without fiber or accompanying protein or fat. White bread, [sugary drinks](#), jams, sweets, [white rice](#), white flour, crackers and fruit juice are examples of these foods. Ultra-processed

foods, where the grains are stripped of their outer layers (including fiber and most nutrients) leaving "refined carbs", also fall into this category.

One of the problems with naked carbs or refined carbs is they [digest and absorb quickly](#), causing an immediate rise in blood sugar. This is followed by a rapid spike in [insulin](#) (a hormone that signals cells to remove sugar from blood) and then a drop in blood sugar. This can lead to hunger and cravings—a vicious cycle that only gets worse with eating more of the same foods.

What about 'net carbs'?

This is another popular term tossed around in dieting discussions. Net carbs refer to the part of the carb food that we actually absorb.

Again, fiber is not easily digestible. And some carb-rich foods contain sugar alcohols, such as sweeteners (like xylitol and sorbitol) that have limited absorption and little to no effect on blood sugar. Deducting the value of fiber and sugar alcohols from the total carbohydrate content of a food gives what's considered its net carb value.

For example, canned pear in juice has around [12.3g of "total carbohydrates" per 100g](#), including 1.7g carb + 1.7g fiber + 1.9g sugar alcohol. So its net carb is $12.3\text{g} - 1.7\text{g} - 1.9\text{g} = 8.7\text{g}$. This means 8.7g of the 12.3g total carbs impacts blood sugar.

The nutrition labels on packaged foods in Australia and New Zealand usually list fiber separately to carbohydrates, so the net carbs have already been calculated. This is not the case in other countries, where "total carbohydrates" are listed.

Does it matter though?

Whether or not you should care about net or naked carbs depends on your dietary preferences, [health goals](#), food accessibility and overall [nutritional needs](#). Generally speaking, we should try to limit our consumption of simple and refined carbs.

The latest [World Health Organization guidelines](#) recommend our carbohydrate intake should ideally come primarily from whole grains, vegetables, fruits and pulses, which are rich in complex carbs and fiber. This can have significant health benefits (to [regulate hunger, improve cholesterol or help with weight management](#)) and reduce the risk of conditions [such as heart disease, obesity and colon cancer](#).

In moderation, naked carbs aren't necessarily bad. But pairing them with fats, protein or fiber [can slow down the digestion](#) and absorption of sugar. This can help to stabilize [blood sugar](#) levels, prevent spikes and crashes and [support personal weight management goals](#). If you're managing diabetes or insulin resistance, paying attention to the composition of your meals, and the quality of your carbohydrate sources is essential.

A ketogenic (high fat, low carb) diet typically restricts carb intake to between 20 and 50g each day. But this carb amount refers to net carbs—so it is possible to eat more carbs from high-fiber sources.

Some tips to try

Some simple strategies can help you get the most out of your carb intake:

- reduce your intake of naked carbs and foods high in sugar and white flour, such as [white bread](#), table sugar, honey, lollies, maple syrup, jam, and [fruit juice](#)
- opt for protein- and fiber-rich carbs. These include oats, sweet potatoes, nuts, avocados, beans, whole grains and broccoli

- if you are eating naked carbs, dress them up with some protein, fat and fiber. For example, top white bread with a nut butter rather than jam
- if you are trying to reduce the carb content in your diet, be wary of any [symptoms of low blood glucose](#), including headaches, nausea, and dizziness
- working with a health-care professional such as an accredited practicing dietitian or your GP can help develop an individualized diet plan that meets your specific needs and goals.

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