Is it true that eating too many carbohydrates can cause diabetes? [1]

Dear Concerned,

Can eating too many carbohydrates increase your chances of developing diabetes?

? Concerned

Answer

Dear Concerned,

Carbohydrates don't cause diabetes, however eating too many calories overall (from carbohydrates or other types of food) can lead to diabetes in some people. Here's what's going on: Usually when a person eats, her or his blood glucose rises and in response insulin, a hormone secreted by the pancreas, is released. Insulin helps cells in the body to absorb glucose from the blood to use for energy or store as fat. People with diabetes either don't produce enough insulin, or their bodies don't respond to the insulin, or both. As a result, glucose remains in the blood, depriving the body's cells of energy they need, and causing damage to blood vessels, heart, kidneys, eyes, and feet. The Go Ask Alice! Q&A Diabetes mellitus [2] has more detailed information on the disease, as does the American Diabetes Association [3] website.

Diabetes can be brought on by a number of factors, including old age, obesity, lack of exercise, or a genetic predisposition. Eating more calories than you expend, whether they're complex carbohydrates, sugars, fats, or proteins, paired with a lack of exercise and being overweight can increase some people's chances of developing diabetes. This is especially true if there is history of the disease in the family. The good news is that many people with or at-risk for developing diabetes are able to manage their condition through regular exercise and a healthy diet.

Getting regular physical activity actually helps the body's cells to properly use insulin. Eating a healthy, balanced diet of fresh whole foods (e.g., grains, veggies, fruits, nuts, legumes) also helps to ensure the proper functioning of glucose and insulin in the body. For ideas about healthy ways to diet and get in shape check out some of the Q&As in the Go Ask Alice! Nutrition and Physical Activity [4] archives.

If you are concerned you may be at risk for developing diabetes, it may be a good idea to
make an appointment with your health care provider. If you need help learning how to eat right and get in shape, s/he may refer you to a registered dietician.

Alice!
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