

Does *This* Give You Anxiety?



Love
your
loaf



...Let's Change That

For so many of us, carbs have become synonymous with weight gain. But, a foodie revolution is determined to change the way we see this macro forever

By Alex Davies Photography by Edward Urrutia

It's the side order so many of us are served with brunch: an instinctual thought of, 'Maybe I shouldn't have bread with that.'

Nodding in recognition? Join the club: 17 per cent of Aussies follow low-carb diets to keep their weight in check, found a 2015 Nielsen survey. Add to that a 2018 poll by the International Food Information Council Foundation in the US, which revealed a quarter of respondents blame the macro for kilo gain. The hashtag #lowcarb has been used nearly 15 million times on Instagram, while one quick google delivers countless articles and books about going low or saying no to the stuff. J-Lo made headlines in January when she showcased her rig after 10 days without carbs. In short, this macro's reputation has suffered a harder hit than an AFLW rookie.

Of course, for some people (like those with diabetes) monitoring carb intake can be a necessity, but experts see many others swerve them without a legit need. "Carb-phobia counselling is almost a daily job," admits Amy Giannotti, a dietitian and strength and conditioning coach. "Many clients believe eating a banana will make them fat." Psychologist Glenn Mackintosh, founder of Weight Management Psychology, sees it too. "It's almost like a love-hate thing," he says. "People think carbs are delicious, but feel a sense of guilt or shame around eating them. There's this real fear of 'if I just look at this food, [I'll] gain five kilos'."

While Courtenay McDermott loves pasta, potato and the like, *WH*'s 34-year-old marketing manager wrangles with almost-engrained ideas about them. "I look at things like pasta or bread as the 'bad carbs' and definitely ... feel like you can only have carbs once a day," she says. "Even when I'm going out for dinner with friends and some of us order pasta, there's that feeling of almost [having to] justify why - 'I didn't have lunch so I'm having pasta for dinner' or, 'I trained today so I'm going to have carbs'."

Just like any big name in the midst of a PR crisis, carbs are fighting back. And experts are leading the sourdough-fuelled charge. Their goal? To clear through the confusion and, most importantly, help us cultivate healthy, happy relationships with the content of our plates (and bread baskets). This carb comeback is gaining traction, but that word 'relationship' is telling. Because the struggle here is as much, if not more, about emotion and mindset as it is about understanding the nutritional benefits of that spud you're eyeing up warily. So, what does it take to fall back in love with (or at least catch feels for) an entire food group?

Hard to swallow

First though, where did things go awry for that packet of penne gathering dust in your cupboard? While old mate Dr Atkins came up with his famous low-carb approach in the '60s, the diet boomed in the early noughties. Since then, we've seen the rise of Paleo then keto (which both err on the low-carb side) as protein and now fat have become the macros du jour (Giannotti mentions how often she sees women who'd rather eat a processed high-protein shake or bar than any sort of carb). Dr Helen Rydge, a clinical psychologist and clinical director at InsideOut - National Institute for Eating Disorders at the University of Sydney, adds that guilt around so-called 'good' and 'bad' foods has always existed in diet culture, but the kind of food we focus on shifts with the times.

Oversimplified nutrition messages don't help, argues accredited practising dietitian Joel Feren. "I think some of the anxiety stems from 'nutrition gurus' and their ... very simplistic approach, saying that carbohydrates lead to sugar in the system, which then gets converted to fat. Biochemically, that is certainly not the case." What *is* the case: carb-rich foods can be nutritional all-stars, influencing everything from workout success to how well you concentrate in meetings. "Carbohydrates are our bodies' preferred fuel source," says Feren. "They [break] down into a sugar called glucose, but that's what our body thrives on. Our muscles and organs largely rely on glucose, as does our brain - if it didn't have that glucose, it would certainly not run as effectively as it could."

Fruit, vegies including potato, legumes and wholegrains also house a carb-type currently captivating experts, scientists and foodies alike: fibre, a best mate who'll help manage your blood-sugar levels, reduce cholesterol and

keep you fuller for longer. Types like resistant starch (found in cooked-and-cooled potato, legumes, oats, onion and garlic) actually feed and nourish gut bacteria. As for workouts, protein *and* carbs are crucial for performance and "replenishing glycogen stores lost in training as well as 'fuelling' the recovery of muscles and the entire body", says Giannotti. Hand us that banana quick smart, will you?

Feren says, "It really upsets me when people go, 'I'm going to cut out carbs to lose weight.' At what cost - nutrient deficiencies, poor mood, elevated cholesterol levels and an impact on your heart health? We really need to think of the big picture. And yes, sometimes we can overeat those types of foods, but we certainly should be including them in small to moderate amounts. After all, you can [also] overeat protein, you can overeat fat and it'll lead to weight gain. The one food that you can't overeat are vegetables. It's a tired, boring, old approach, but we need to encourage moderation and include foods from the five food groups, including wholegrains and starchy foods." Case in point: in one of the most comprehensive studies on carb intake, published in *The Lancet* at the end of 2018, Brigham and Women's Hospital researchers landed on a sweet spot - around 50 per cent of our kilojoules should come from carb-containing foods (the less processed the better, obvs), with anything lower or higher associated with increased mortality.

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The number of times in millions that #lowcarb has been used on Instagram.

Chop the guilt

Complex Carbs

That spud delivers more than just carbs. Dietitian Joel Feren unpacks the other nutrition perks these 'feared' foods have to offer.

Quality bread

Fibre, vitamin E, iodine (for thyroid function), folate, B vitamins, potassium and iron.

Potato

Vitamin B6, potassium (for blood pressure control), fibre, resistant starch. Plus, sweet potato boasts beta carotene (for skin and eye health).

Pasta

Low-sodium, B vitamins (for energy), fibre (more in wholemeal) and sustainable energy via low-GI carbs.

Rice

Folate, B vitamins, manganese, phosphorus. The brown kind also packs fibre, selenium (a powerful antioxidant) and magnesium.



Pasta (no) problems

En-grained thinking

It's great knowing what carbs bring to the health party, but changing mindset takes time. Especially with some celebs and influencers spreading the no-carb message like it's #spon. Mackintosh talks about 'rules' so many of us set ourselves, dictating if we're 'allowed' to have certain foods, and how problematic these can be. "We've seen the same thing before with fats and sugars [as well as] carbs," he says. "When you start to almost demonise a food, that's when you can run into trouble. But you can also do that when you put foods on a pedestal. We like to think of food as morally neutral. People are so quick to judge 'good', 'bad', 'right', 'wrong', 'should', 'shouldn't'. When you have all of those judgements in your mind, it undermines your ability to enjoy food." Another by-product of these labels, he adds, is as soon as you tell yourself you *can't* eat something, that's all you want (true story).

The intensity and flexibility of the 'rules' matters, says Rydge. "For someone with an eating disorder, this rule-based thinking would be extremely black and white," she explains. "They would never break that rule. For the average person,

the rules are a little bit more permeable - 'I'd better not eat carbs,' not 'I cannot eat carbs.' We'll give ourselves permission to break that rule really arbitrarily." (Signs it's worth getting expert help for you or someone else? Obsessionality and patterns. Things like eating in secret, avoiding social situations or not eating around others; obsessing over the gym, even when unwell; a teenager dieting or cutting out food groups. "It's about the intensity and how much [the behaviour] is ... affecting you physically, socially, mentally," says Rydge.)

Bite by bite

Loosening up your rule book around carbs starts with facing your fear. Gradually reintroduce the foods you're worried about - say, by having half a cup of rice tomorrow night. Over time and as you see nothing really bad happens, it becomes easier, says Rydge. "Often the fear is 'if I eat carbs I'm going to gain five kilos', which is impossible. It's about testing out some of those beliefs that go along with the rules you've put in place, because the beliefs are often false."

Mackintosh is a fan of intuitive eating for its focus on trusting yourself and your body, rather than letting rules take over. "Intuitive eating is a life-changer for a lot of people who don't have a healthy relationship with food, but it takes time and practise," he says. "It's a skill like sewing or kicking a football." The idea behind this cousin of mindful eating? You tune into the reasons you're eating and the sensations that come with each mouthful, but also learn to recognise your body's hunger and fullness signals as well as tune *out* the myriad self-judgements running through your mind. (Sidenote: it goes without saying that it's smart to check in with an expert for advice and before making any big dietary changes.)

Ultimately, the proof is in the bread pudding. "When I do have carbs, I notice how much more energy I have," McDermott admits. "I realise I should probably eat more of them." Mackintosh adds, "See what your brain thinks [when you eat carbs] and what they do for your performance, energy and mood. You start to experience the benefits and see they aren't the bad guy." We'll take that - with a side of crusty sourdough, please. **wh**

If you need support for an eating disorder, call The Butterfly Foundation's National Helpline on 1800 334 673.

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The percentage of our diets that should be made up by carbs, according to a 2018 study in *The Lancet*. That covers everything from vegies and fruit to grains and starches. Pasta tonight? Yes, please.