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NUTRI-NEWS Q&A

Unlocking mystery of counting carbs

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Lately I've been seeing the term "net carbohydrate" on labels. What does that mean?

These are marketing terms used by food manufacturers targeting a public that is increasingly wary of carbohydrates. In "low carbohydrate" products, the carbohydrate often is delivered in the form of sugar alcohols, such as mannitol and sorbitol, or poorly digested "resistant carbohydrates" classed as fiber on the label.

Food manufacturers subtract the fiber and sugar alcohol from the total carbohydrates to calculate "net carbohydrate," with the rationale that they do not raise the blood sugar as much.

Does it work? Well, if weight is your issue, don't overlook the calorie content of the food you are considering. Often "low carbohydrate" and "sugar free" foods have as many calories as their standard counterparts, and cost much more.

If you are counting carbohydrates because you have diabetes, be aware that the American Diabetes Association recommends that people with diabetes primarily use the total carbohydrate and total calorie content to manage dietary intake. For those who are more skilled at carbohydrate counting, diabetes educators suggest the following guidelines:

For foods with less than 5 grams of fiber, use the total carbohydrate content.

For foods with 5 or more grams of fiber, subtract the dietary fiber from the total carbohydrate.

For foods containing sugar alcohols, subtract half of the sugar alcohol content from the total carbohydrate content.

The Food and Drug Administration has not defined "net carbohydrate" or even "low carbohydrate" but plans to. In petitions to the FDA, some food manufacturers have proposed the following guidelines for nutrient claims for carbohydrates, including:

Carbohydrate Free: less than 0.5 grams of total carbohydrates per serving.

Low Carbohydrate: 9 grams or less of carbohydrates per serving.

Reduced Carbohydrate: at least 25 percent fewer carbohydrates than a regular product.

Net carbohydrate: Total carbohydrates (total fiber plus sugar alcohol).

The FDA is still getting ready to decide, so we may not see those regulations anytime soon.

Ironically, Atkins Nutritionals, one of the originators of the "net carb" terminology, is dropping the term from its food labels in favor of the "net Atkins count," an index of the glycemic impact (blood sugar impact) of specific products.

Bottom line: Focus on total carbohydrates and calories for now and stay tuned.

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