



Net Carbs, Impact Carbs, Zero Carbs that Count – What Does It Mean?

Carbohydrate ("carbs") restriction is not advised for everyone. Those who do aerobic exercise regularly, such as walking or biking, or who are not overweight, should ignore the popular press touting this type of diet.

Food labels and restaurant choices are commonly advertising "net carbs" or "carbs that count" now. "Impact carbs" and "effective carbs" are other similar terms often found on food labels. Net carbs are defined as total carbohydrate minus dietary fiber and sugar alcohol. The Food and Drug Administration is currently working on defining low carb or net carb levels, much like the guidelines that define use of the terms fat free, low-fat and low-sodium foods.

For about 10 years, "carbohydrate counting" has been recommended by the American Diabetes Association for controlling blood sugars in people with diabetes. Since fiber in foods is not digested and absorbed like other carbohydrates, our bodies do not convert it into blood glucose. Carbohydrates in the form of fiber and sugar alcohols have less impact on blood sugar than do sugars and starches. They cannot, however, be ignored altogether.

When there are 5 or more grams of fiber per serving, people with diabetes have been advised that they can subtract the grams of fiber from the total grams of carbohydrate to determine how much of the carbohydrate will affect their blood glucose. People with diabetes have also been told that any food with more than 10 grams of sugar alcohol (such as erythritol, sorbitol, xylitol and mannitol) should be counted as containing half the listed amount as carbohydrates. (For example, 12 grams sugar alcohol would be counted as 6 grams carbohydrate.)

This is the general concept that is now being applied – but with a twist – to the new food labels with "net carbs" or "zero carbs that count." The main concern with these new food labels is that the subtraction process has been generalized to all fiber grams and all sugar alcohols. However, eating sugar alcohols can cause blood sugar to rise. And one needs to be cautious in eating foods with 10 or more grams of sugar alcohols, since this amount may cause intestinal gas and diarrhea.

The bottom line is, if a food label displays these new terms, you could choose to ignore the claim as an advertising gimmick by the manufacturer. Or, you could check the total amount of fiber that they are subtracting and be sure it meets the guideline of being 5 or more grams. Then remember to count the sugar alcohol content if it is more than 10 grams per serving.

For more information about low carbohydrate diets, see [No/Low Carbohydrate, High Protein Diets](#) or [Nutrition Spotlight March/April 2004](#)

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