

Starchy foods



Starchy foods are our main source of carbohydrate, and play an important role in a healthy diet.

Low-carb diets

Low-carbohydrate (low-carb) diets usually involve cutting out most starchy foods. These diets tend to be high in fat, and eating a high-fat diet (especially [saturated fat](#) from foods such as meat, cheese and butter) could increase your risk of [heart disease](#). Low-carb diets could also restrict the amount of fruit, vegetables and fibre you eat, so try to ensure starchy foods make up about a third of your diet.

For information and advice about healthy weight loss, see [Lose weight](#).

Starchy foods such as potatoes, bread, cereals, rice and pasta should make up about a third of the food you eat. Where you can, choose wholegrain varieties, or eat potatoes with their skins on for more fibre.

Starch is the most common form of carbohydrate in our diet. We should eat some starchy foods every day as part of a healthy balanced diet.

Data published by the [National Diet and Nutrition Survey](#), which looks at food consumption in the UK, shows that most of us should be eating more starchy foods.

Why do you need starchy foods?

Starchy foods are a good source of energy and the main source of a range of nutrients in our diet.

As well as starch, they contain fibre, calcium, iron and B vitamins.

Some people think starchy foods are fattening, but gram for gram they contain fewer than half the calories of fat. Just watch out for the added fats used when you cook and serve them: this is what increases the calorie content.

Learn more about fat in [Fat: the facts](#).

Starchy foods and fibre

Wholegrain varieties of starchy foods, and potatoes – particularly when eaten with their skins on – are good sources of fibre. Fibre can help to keep our bowels healthy and can help us to feel full, which means we are less likely to eat too much. This makes wholegrain starchy foods and potatoes eaten with their skins a particularly good choice if you are trying to lose weight.

Fibre is only found in foods that come from plants. There are two types of fibre:

- Insoluble fibre. The body can't digest this type of fibre, so it passes through the gut, helping other food and waste products move through the gut more easily. Wholegrain bread and breakfast cereals, brown rice, and wholewheat pasta are good sources of this kind of fibre.
- Soluble fibre. This type of fibre can be partly digested and may help reduce the amount of cholesterol in the blood. Oats and pulses are good sources.

Tips to eat more starchy foods

These tips can help you to increase the amount of starchy foods in your diet.

- When you choose wholegrain varieties, you'll also increase the amount of fibre you are eating.
- Porridge is perfect as a warming winter breakfast.
- Whole oats with fruit and yoghurt make a great summer breakfast.
- Opt for wholegrain cereals or mix some in with your favourite cereal.
- Have more rice or pasta and less sauce.
- Try different breads, such as seeded, wholemeal and granary, and go for thick slices.
- Try brown rice: it makes a very tasty rice salad.
- Try a jacket potato for lunch, and eat the skin for even more fibre.
- If you're having sausages and mash, have more mash, some vegetables and cut down on the number of sausages you eat.

Types of starchy foods

Below you'll find more detailed information about the nutritional benefits of some of the most common starchy foods, along with information on storage and preparation from the Food Standards Agency and the British Dietetic Association.

Potatoes

Potatoes are a great choice of starchy food, and a good source of energy, fibre, B vitamins and potassium.

In the UK we get a lot of our vitamin C from potatoes because, although they only contain between 11–16mg of vitamin C per 100g of potatoes, we generally eat a lot of them. They're good value for money and can be a healthy menu choice.

Potatoes are a healthy choice when boiled, baked (jacket potatoes), mashed or roasted with only a small amount of fat and no added salt. French fries and other chips cooked in oil or served with salt are not a healthy choice.

Although a potato is a vegetable, in the UK we mostly eat them as the starchy food part of a meal. Because of this, potatoes don't count towards your five portions of fruit and vegetables a day, but they can play an important role in your diet.

When cooking or serving potatoes, try to go for lower fat (polyunsaturated) spreads or unsaturated oils such as olive or sunflower oil, instead of butter.

Leave potato skins on where possible to keep in more of the fibre and vitamins. For example, eat the skin when you're having boiled potatoes or a jacket potato.

If you're boiling potatoes, some nutrients will leak out into the water, especially if you've peeled them. To stop this happening, only use enough water to cover them, and cook them only for as long as they need.

Storing potatoes in a cool, dark and dry place will help stop them sprouting. Don't eat any green or sprouting bits of potatoes.

Rice and grains

Rice and grains are an excellent choice of starchy food. They give us energy, are low in fat and good value for money.

There are many types to choose from, including:

- couscous
- bulgur wheat
- all kinds of rice, such as quick-cook, arborio, basmati, long grain, brown, short grain and wild

As well as carbohydrates, rice and grains contain:

- protein, which the body needs to grow and repair itself
- fibre, which can help the body get rid of waste products
- B vitamins, which help release energy from the food we eat, and help the body to work properly

Rice and grains, such as couscous and bulgur wheat, can be eaten hot or cold and in salads.

There are a few precautions you should take when storing and reheating cooked rice and grains. This is because the spores of some food poisoning bugs can survive cooking.

If cooked rice or grains are left standing at room temperature, the spores can germinate. The bacteria multiply and produce toxins that can cause vomiting and diarrhoea. Reheating food won't get rid of the toxins.

Therefore, it's best to serve rice and grains when they've just been cooked. If this isn't possible, cool them within an hour after cooking and keep them refrigerated until reheating or using in a cold dish.

It's important to throw away any rice and grains that have been left at room temperature overnight.

If you aren't going to eat rice immediately, refrigerate it within one hour and eat within 24 hours. Don't reheat rice and grains more than once.

Follow the "use by" date and storage instructions on the label for any cold rice or grain salads that you buy.

Bread

Bread – especially wholemeal, granary, brown and seeded varieties – is a healthy choice to eat as part of a balanced diet.

Wholegrain, wholemeal and brown breads give us energy and contain B vitamins, vitamin E, fibre and a wide range of minerals. White bread also contains a range of [vitamins and minerals](#), but it has less fibre than wholegrain, wholemeal or brown breads.

Some people avoid bread because they think they're allergic to wheat, or because they think bread is fattening. But cutting out any type of food altogether could be bad for your health, because you might miss out on a whole range of nutrients that we need to stay healthy.

Bread can be stored at room temperature. Follow the "best before" date to make sure you eat it fresh.

Pasta

Pasta is another healthy option to base your meal on. It consists of dough made from durum wheat and water, and contains iron and B vitamins, as well as a small amount of sodium ([salt](#)). Wholewheat or wholegrain are healthier alternatives to ordinary pasta as they contain more fibre. Also, we digest wholegrain foods more slowly so they can make us feel full for longer.

Dried pasta can be stored in a cupboard and typically has a long shelf life, while fresh pasta will need refrigerating and has a shorter lifespan. Check the food packaging for "best before" or "use by" dates and further storage instructions.

Cereal products

Cereal products are made from grains. The benefits of eating wholegrain cereals are that they can contribute to our daily intake of iron, fibre, B vitamins and protein. They can also provide a slow release of energy throughout the day.

Wheat, oats, barley, rye and rice are commonly available cereals that can be eaten as wholegrains. This means cereal products consisting of oats and oatmeal, like porridge, and wholewheat products are healthy breakfast options.

Barley, couscous, corn, quinoa and tapioca also count as healthy cereal products.

Many cereal products in the UK are refined, with low wholegrain content. They can also be high in added [salt](#) and [sugar](#). When you're shopping for cereals, check the [food labels](#) to compare the nutrition levels of different products.

Always check the food packaging for "best before" or "use by" dates and for storage instructions.

Acrylamide in starchy food

Acrylamide is a chemical that can be found in some starchy foods when they are toasted, roasted, baked, grilled or fried at high temperatures.

Some studies have suggested that acrylamide could be harmful to our health. The Food Standards Agency (FSA) recommends that bread should be toasted to the lightest colour acceptable, and, when chips are made at home, that they are cooked to a light golden colour. Manufacturers' instructions for frying or oven-heating foods should be followed carefully and, when roasting or baking root vegetables and potatoes, or baking bread or pastry, it is a good idea to avoid overcooking or burning.

Boiling, steaming and microwave cooking are unlikely to produce much acrylamide.

When storing potatoes, keep them somewhere dark, cool and dry, and not in the fridge. Storing potatoes at a very low temperature can increase the amount of sugar they hold, which could lead to higher levels of acrylamide when they are cooked. For more information, see the [FSA survey on acrylamide](#).