

## COMPLEX VS. REFINED CARBOHYDRATES

**Complex carbohydrates** are found in foods that are unprocessed or minimally processed. In general, the more “complex” a carbohydrate, the more nutrients and fiber it contains and the more slowly it is digested and absorbed by the body. Foods made up of complex carbohydrate are rich in fiber and are slowly absorbed, resulting in more stable blood sugar levels with fewer “spikes and drops,” so they help you feel less hunger and cravings.

Complex carbohydrates are found in whole foods, like vegetables, fruits, legumes, and whole grains. Grains and sugars in particular are often highly processed and stripped of their nutritional value and fiber before being added to foods.

**Refined (simple) carbohydrates** are found in foods that have been highly processed. There are many reasons food manufacturers may process foods, including to increase shelf life and to stimulate cravings for the food. During processing, much of the vitamins, minerals, and fiber are removed from food, making it rapidly digestible and less nutritious.

### **Nutrition labels and ingredient lists can help you determine whether a food contains complex or refined carbohydrates.**

These terms on an ingredients list indicate complex carbohydrates:

Whole grain, 100% whole grain  
100% whole wheat  
Brown rice  
Whole oats  
Sprouted grain, sprouted wheat, sprouted corn, etc  
Cracked wheat/grain  
Whole amaranth, kamut, spelt  
Whole quinoa

These terms on an ingredient list indicate refined carbohydrates:

Wheat flour  
Enriched wheat flour  
Bleached wheat flour  
Semolina flour  
Durum wheat/flour  
Rice flour  
Any sugar or sweetener-see separate handout “Hidden Sugars and Sweeteners” for a list of other names for sugars.

The term “multi-grain” can be confusing. Foods labeled multi-grain may be whole grain (containing complex carbohydrates), but are not required to be. Multi-grain

simply means that the product contains more than one type of grain (for example, corn and wheat). Sometimes the term “multi-grain” is used in marketing so the food seems healthy, though it may be just refined carbohydrates. Read the ingredient list carefully to determine if the product contains whole grain.

### **What foods contain refined carbohydrates?**

Most people know that pastries, cookies, and cakes contain refined carbohydrates; but did you know that hundreds of other common foods and beverages contain refined carbohydrates as well? The following foods are made up of simple, refined carbohydrates. Consider them “special occasion” foods if you enjoy them, but do not include them as part of the foundation of your healthy eating plan:

White bread  
Pasta\*  
Pizza crust\*  
“Wraps”/tortillas\*  
Pretzels  
Donuts, pastries  
Buns and rolls\*  
Bagels  
Muffins  
English muffins\*  
Soda  
Pita chips  
Ritz crackers  
Saltines  
Goldfish crackers  
Fruit roll-ups/fruit snacks  
Candy

\*Whole grain versions of these items are available, but unless the ingredient list specifically states 100% whole grain/wheat/brown rice, etc, they are not complex carbohydrates. “Wheat flour” does NOT mean whole grain.