

Net (Impact) Carbohydrates

Broadly speaking, 'net carbs' refer to carbohydrates that are actually absorbed following ingestion. When you ingest foods containing carbohydrates, they're typically broken down easily into individual units (sugars) by amylase; an enzyme produced in the mouth, stomach and small intestine. The body can only absorb carbohydrates once broken-down into these singular sugar units.

Some carbohydrates, however, cannot be broken-down to this level, and therefore are largely not absorbed (partially only, in some instances). Sugar alcohols and fibres are often unabsorbable, and as such, pass straight through the body without attributing toward caloric (energy) intake – unlike other macronutrients which they might be ingested with.

Fibres

There are some fibres which are water soluble and count towards caloric intake. These fibres are absorbed and convert to fatty acids in the colon; producing a small caloric intake (much smaller than 4kcal per 1g alike typical carbohydrates) in the body. Insoluble fibres however render essentially no caloric intake at all, given their nature of passing through the colon in the same form after ingestion.

Sugar Alcohols

There are a number of variations of sugar alcohols and each are absorbed quite differently by the body – thus affect caloric intake differently. Most of the commonly used sugar alcohols have a partial absorption rate only, and are then excreted in urine, as opposed to through the digestive tract. Generally, sugar alcohols don't have a significant impact on blood sugar or insulin, and don't contribute a significant caloric intake to those whom are ingesting them.

Fibres and sugar alcohols can be strategically selected for use in foods to minimise caloric value of that food. In the case of many high protein snack type products, fibres and sugar alcohols are used to decidedly replace more of the absorbable carbohydrate types; reducing the 'impact' of the carbohydrate content on net caloric value of the food – hence the term, 'net carbs'.