



count carbs with confidence

Chew on this: You can get better at nailing your carbohydrate counts. Practice with these tips to count with confidence at home and when eating out.

BY Hope S. Warshaw, R.D., CDE

Count your carbs. Piece of cake (or pie), right? It sounds like simple math. But algebra class was a breeze compared to learning to estimate the amount of carbohydrate in foods.

Nailing carb counts takes practice. "It's no wonder so many people I counsel wing it," says Mary Ellen Wolf, R.N., CDE, a diabetes educator at George Washington

University Medical Center in Washington, D.C., who has been married to a PWD type 1 for 27 years. In fact, there's a common carb-counting abbreviation tossed about by people with diabetes: WAG (wild-a** guess). It also stands for "we all guess"—sometimes.

"Don't shoot for 100 percent exact 100 percent of the time," says Toby Smithson, R.D., CDE, PWD

type 1, of the Lake County Health Department in Illinois and spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration doesn't demand this accuracy from food companies, she says, who print labels in quantity and then face food processing and packaging variables. We've reached out to people with experience for practical pointers.

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eating in

Practice your carb-counting skills at home. Here are some tips from people who have learned to account for the numbers.



Eyeball accurate portions.

Keep your eyes honest by double-checking your portions. "Once a month I'll put my oatmeal, cold cereal, pasta, rice, and other starches in my usual serving bowl or plate. But before I take a bite, I put it in a measuring cup to check up on my estimates," says Amanda DiMatteo, 23, PWD type 1, from Lexington, Kentucky.

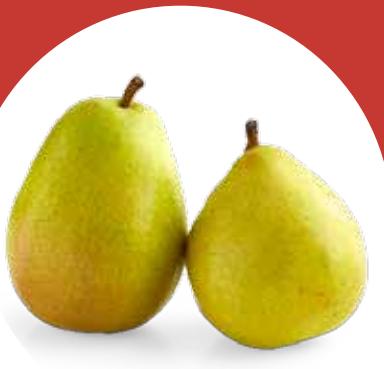
Keep your tools handy.

To increase the likelihood you'll reach for your measuring cups and food scale, keep them on the counter. "I took this advice from a dietitian and noticed how much more I use them and how much more accurate my carb counts were," Amanda says. The evidence? Better after-meal glucose results about 2 hours after the first bite.

Be a label reader.

"Your quickest, cheapest, and most accurate carb count is from a Nutrition Facts label," says Smithson. Focus on total carbohydrate (added sugars are included in this total). Nutrition Facts are reasonably precise considering the variation in ingredients from batch to batch and FDA labeling regulations.





Pick produce by size.

Fruits, vegetables, potatoes, and other produce come in a wide range of sizes. The difference between a small and large apple can easily be 15 grams of carb. So precision in the produce aisle counts. Take a few minutes on occasion to weigh pieces of produce. Look up the carb counts based on the weights you buy. Make an effort to choose similar sizes each time you shop.

Record recipe counts.

Got a handful of favorite recipes? Take the time to figure carb counts. "Pile up the recipes, carve out an hour in front of the computer, and get the job done," says Susan Haynes, 50, PWD type 2, from Memphis, who now has the carb counts for her old and new favorites (before and after being diagnosed with diabetes) in a personal food database.

Build your food database

"My carb database, which I keep on nutritiondata.com, contains just the foods I eat," says Susan Haynes, PWD type 2. "No need to be bothered with thousands of foods I'll never eat."

For easy everyday lookup, put together your personal food database, which may be just a hundred foods or so. Start by listing the foods you regularly eat. Look at what's in your refrigerator, freezer, and pantry and on your shopping list. Next think about your portions. Then get out your measuring tools and record the amounts you eat. Look up the carb counts of these foods in the amounts you eat. Then group the foods into meals and total the carb counts for favorite combinations.

Online nutrition data

- The U.S. Department of Agriculture's database of 8,000 foods: nal.usda.gov/fnic/foodcomp/search/
- Fatsecret.com is an online diet, nutrition, and weight loss community that provides practical advice and a supportive network through members' contributions.
- Nutritiondata.com provides a large nutrient database based on the USDA database and many restaurant and supermarket foods. Keep a food journal, analyze recipes, and build a personal food database.
- The American Diabetes Association's diabetes.org/myfoodadvisor is a carb and calorie counter and tracks meals.

Be mindful of mixed foods

When facing homemade casseroles, lasagna, chili, and pasta salads—combination foods thick with pasta, potatoes, rice, beans, corn, or other starches—use this handy estimation guide, below. If it's a recipe you make regularly, take the time to add up the carbs precisely and measure a level serving (not one that spills over the edge of the cup).



dining out

Sure, you can count the carbs in restaurant meals accurately. Look up your favorite menu items online and take your skills on the road.

Uncover hidden carbs.

High blood glucose after eating Chinese, Thai, or Italian? Demystify these cuisines by looking at recipes (in books or online) and their counts before you dine out. Sugars and starches tend to hide in marinades and sauces.



Invite your eyes along.

Look at the portions you're served and count up the carbs before you take a bite. Too much? "Push the extras aside and don't eat them, or pack them up for tomorrow," says Smithson, who has lived with type 1 diabetes for more than 40 years.



Become a food sleuth.

Wolf shared a secret weapon her husband has honed. In restaurants where portions are unpredictable, he checks out the portions and types of foods on the plates of other diners as he's escorted to his table.





Avoid pizza perils.

Figuring the carbs in pizza is a challenge, from the crust to the sauce. Fortunately, there is plenty of published information on pizza counts to help you gauge your carb estimates. For frozen, look on the box. For chain restaurants, look up counts online. These numbers can help you make educated guesses when you eat at independent shops. Use your eyes to check the thickness of the crust, the diameter of the pie, and the width of the slice—does is approximate published counts?



Travel with foods in tow.

"To minimize restaurant excursions and carb-counting challenges when we travel, as well as minimizing expenses, we stay in hotels with a kitchenette," Wolf says. "We stop at a local grocery store and buy foods we are familiar with for a few breakfasts, lunches, and simple dinners." Their must-haves include baby carrots, sugar snap peas, dried fruit, and peanut M&M's.



Carb counts on the go

Used to be that you'd have to thumb through a thick book to get carb counts on the road, but today there's an endless supply of websites and apps for mobile phones. Before you buy, search your options and consider ease of use more than the depth of the database. "Many apps require a lot of manual data input and can be burdensome to use," says Amy Tenderich, PWD type 1 LADA, creator of diabetes news blog diabetesmine.com and community manager of diabeticconnect.com. "But it's worth it if you're passionate about improving your carb-counting accuracy," she says.

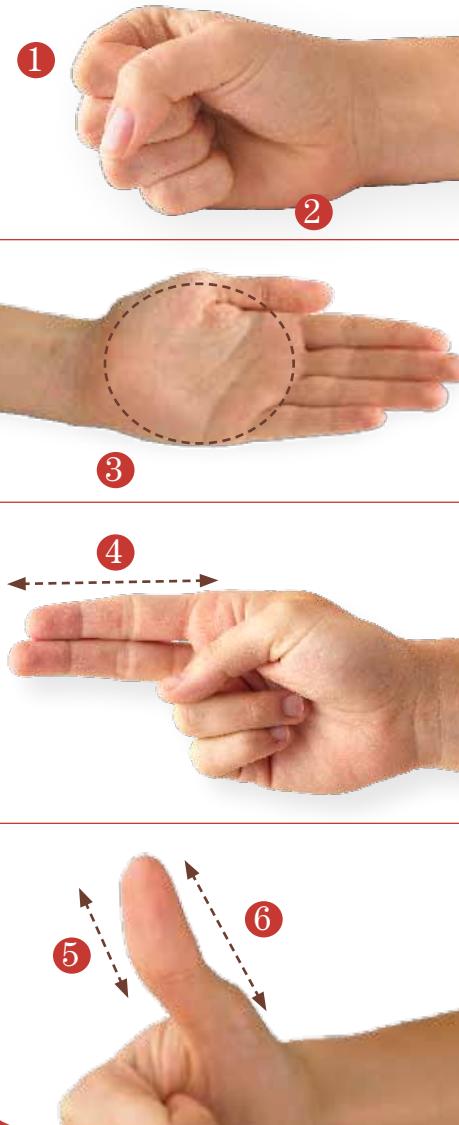
Tools and apps

- **LoseIt!:** An iPhone app geared toward weight loss. loseit.com
- **MyFitnessPal:** An iPhone and Android app and online tool that remembers foods you like to create your custom database. myfitnesspal.com
- **The Daily Plate:** LiveStrong's tool has nutrition data, fitness activities, and calories burned. livestrong.com/thedailyplate/iphone-calorie-tracker/
- **GoMeals:** Insulin maker Sanofi-Aventis iPhone app has features for recording, adding up food intake. gomeals.com

Give yourself a hand

You have built-in measuring tools at the ends of your arms. "While not exact, these approximations are better than a WAG," says certified diabetes educator Mary Ellen Wolf.

1. Loose fist = 1 cup
2. Tight fist = $\frac{1}{2}$ cup
3. Palm of hand = 3 ounces
4. Two fingers lengthwise = 1 ounce
5. Tip of thumb = 1 teaspoon
6. Length of thumb = 1 tablespoon



carb quiz guess the grams

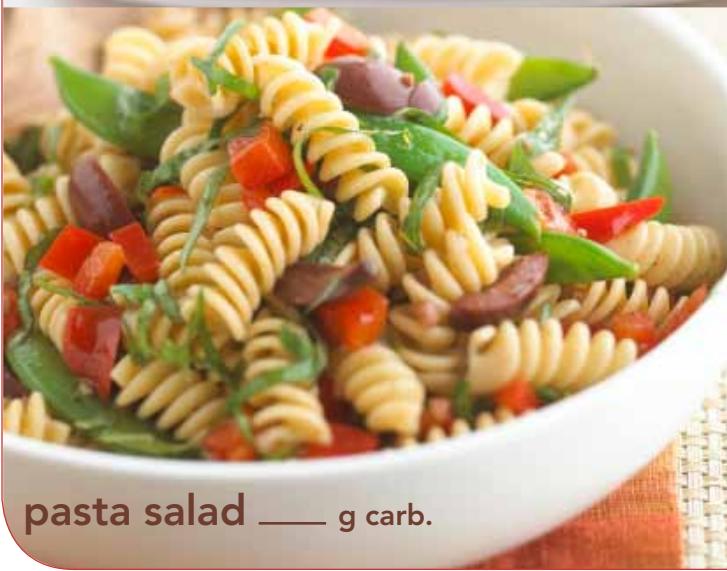
Test your skill at estimating the carbohydrate grams in these foods, often encountered when dining out and at parties. See the answers on page 104.



cheese dip ____ g carb.



peppermint ice cream pie ____ g carb.



pasta salad ____ g carb.



pumpkin bars ____ g carb.

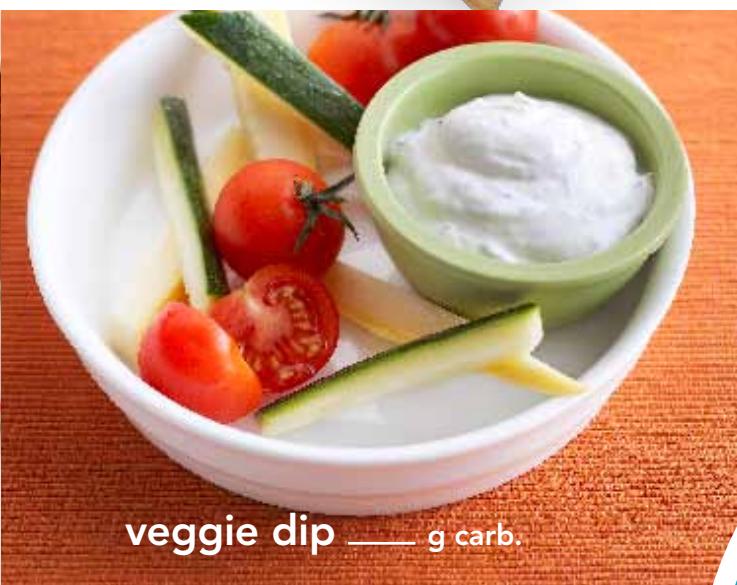
coleslaw ____ g carb.



pizza ____ g carb.



holiday cookies ____ g carb.



veggie dip ____ g carb.



TURN THE PAGE
FOR ANSWERS & TIPS

carb quiz answers



1 | 20 g carb.

Cheese dip: 2 tablespoons dip + 1 ounce tortilla chips

The dip itself has only 4 g carb. The tortilla chips up the count. Consider dipping nonstarchy veggies instead to cut total carbohydrate.

2 | 65 g carb.

Peppermint ice cream pie: $\frac{1}{8}$ pie

Many full-sugar pies are cut into just eight slices for serving. A narrow sliver lets you enjoy the taste and stay within your carb count.

3 | 35 g carb.

Pasta salad: 1 cup

More air means fewer carb grams. Large pieces of pasta stretched with lots of nonstarchy veggies will have a lower count than small pasta pieces packed into a cup.

4 | 35 g carb.

Pumpkin bar: 2x2 inches

Frosting can easily double the carb count of a baked treat. When possible, choose unfrosted goodies or enjoy half of a frosted serving.

5 | 10 g carb.

Creamy coleslaw: $\frac{1}{2}$ cup

Cabbage is low-carb, but a sweet, mayo-base sauce adds carb grams (and fat grams). For calorie and carb savings, opt for a vinegar-dressing coleslaw without dried fruit.

6 | 25 g carb.

Holiday sandwich cookie:

A sandwich cookie doubles the carb count (the cookie topper plus the filling are usually high in sugar). Look for single-layer cookies adorned with a few sprinkles or powdered sugar.

7 | 2 g carb.

Veggie dip: 2 tablespoons dip + $\frac{1}{4}$ cup mixed raw vegetables

Enjoy the crunch! There are so few carbs in raw nonstarchy vegetables that you can consider them "free" foods. Do count the calories from the dip, however, to stay on track.

8 | 25 g carb.

Veggie pizza with Canadian-style bacon: $\frac{1}{8}$ pizza

To target this carb count, reach for a slice of thin-crust pizza that's about 4 inches wide at the widest part.

9 | 45 g carb.

Brown rice: 1 cup

Although we always recommend brown rice for its extra fiber, there's not much difference in total carbohydrate. The fluffier the rice, the fewer the carbs. 