

Pesach Dieters, Take Note: You Can Have Your Potato— and Eat It, Too!

Q Potatoes, potatoes and more potatoes ... with all these carbs, it's no wonder I gain a pound for every day of Pesach—and the week before, too! How can I avoid overdoing the carbs?

As a long-time potato lover, I feel the need to defend one of my favorite tubers. Potatoes get a bad rap. They're not truly "fattening," as many people like to think; in fact, plain potatoes contain no fat at all. At one point in my life, I was even able to lose about thirty pounds on a self-designed potato diet. (Of course, that was during my pre-professional days. I would never recommend such a limited food plan

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now.) My point is simply that potatoes are actually healthful and delicious, and contain important nutrients like fiber, vitamin C, potassium and folate; the latter is particularly significant for women of childbearing age, since re-

for life. They are your quick energy source, providing fuel—glucose—for your movements, including those you may not think about much, such as breathing and brain activity.² And, like potatoes, many carbohydrates are good

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search has shown an adequate intake of folic acid (400 micrograms per day) may reduce the incidence of neural tube defects during pregnancy.¹ Sweet potatoes are also rich in nutrients, especially vitamin A. (Check out the nutritional profile of both white and sweet potatoes in the sidebar.)

In general, starchy foods like potatoes and sweet potatoes are undeservedly vilified. Carbohydrates are actually good for you—and are critical

sources of key nutrients—after all, fruits, vegetables and whole grains are all carbs and are packed with vitamins, minerals and antioxidants. Dietary fiber, which may help lower cholesterol, control blood sugar and provide protection against cancer, is a type of carbohydrate as well.³

But if potatoes and other carbs are as healthy as I say they are, why are so many people convinced that they're the source of weight gain? One reason

for this is an observation made by obesity researchers. Remember the “low-fat” craze of the eighties and early nineties? Researchers found that at the same time Americans began reducing their fat intake and eating more carbohydrates, obesity rates began to climb.⁴ While this suggests some relationship between carbs and obesity, it does not mean that the increase in carbohydrate intake actually *caused* the observed weight gain.

For many people though, the circumstantial evidence is there: When they eat more carbs, they gain weight. But eating too much of *any* food is a recipe for weight gain! It just seems easier to overload on calories when it comes to carbs, for several reasons. Although they’re filling, that sense of fullness doesn’t last. If you eat a meal that consists only of carbohydrates, the food will be broken down and absorbed quickly into your bloodstream and, within a few hours or so, you’ll probably be hungry again.⁵ That will send you back to the kitchen for more food, which will add more calories to your day and tack on the pounds. Also, many carbohydrates tend to be “comfort foods” (think creamy mashed potatoes, yummy chocolate cake or a big bowl of pasta or rice), which people eat when they’re not really hungry and usually overdo portion sizes. Plus, carbs like cake and cookies are loaded with extra fat and sugar—which add more calories too.

In recent years, the widespread popularity of high-protein diets like the Atkins diet and South Beach diet only added more fuel to the fire. But the jury is still out on why these diets work so well. Some researchers suggest that the additional protein in high-protein diets lends more satiety to the food plan so dieters eat fewer calories. In that case, it’s not that carbs lead to weight gain, but rather there is a potential weight-loss benefit in eating more protein. Researchers speculate that it’s also easier to stick to a diet that is more liberal with protein. Think about the food options recommended on these diets, like meat and cheese; if you’re allowed more of the “beef” in the meal—literally or figuratively—you’ll probably feel more satisfied. And remember, too, that these diets are typically pretty restrictive. Choosing from only a limited amount of foods works in your favor when you’re trying to diet; there’s less to overeat. Plus, there’s the idea of “food-specific satiety”: there’s a limit to how much you can eat of a specific food before you tire of it, even if it’s the juiciest steak.⁶


It’s true that high-protein diets *may* lead to better weight-loss results (at least in the short term) and may also be easier to adhere to—but that does *not* mean that carbs are bad, and it certainly doesn’t mean that potatoes are out. However, even I, as a potato lover, can understand a little potato fatigue on Pesach. That’s why you need to make sure your Pesach meals and snacks have *balance*—each should contain a good mix of carbs, protein and a bit of fat for satiety. This will help you feel satisfied and will also ensure that your body gets the nutrients from these different types of foods.

You don’t have to give up potatoes to balance your meals—just add something to them! Pesach is the perfect time to experiment with potato-combination dishes. How about a baked potato topped with other veggies, like broc-

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- **Baked potato (medium) with broccoli (1 cup) and part-skim mozzarella (1 ounce):** 271 calories, 5 grams fat, 12 grams protein, 41 grams carbohydrates
- **Baked potato (medium) with light tuna (4 ounces, canned in water) and part-skim mozzarella (1 ounce):** 372 calories, 6 grams fat, 40 grams protein, 37 grams carbohydrates
- **Scrambled eggs (1 whole, 3 whites) and hash browns (1 medium potato):** 284 calories, 5 grams fat, 22 grams protein, 38 grams carbohydrates
- **Mixed green salad (2 cups) with reduced-calorie dressing (2 teaspoons), lean beef (3 ounces) and a baked potato (medium):** 380 calories, 10 grams fat, 32 grams protein, 43 grams carbohydrates

coli or spinach, and a bit of cheese? That's a balanced and delicious meal right there (and one I personally eat quite often). Or try tuna-stuffed potatoes, another heart-healthy and *chametz*-free meal. Scrambled eggs and hash-browned potatoes are a good substitute for cereal for a Pesach breakfast; use only one yolk, but throw in as many whites as you like, and try using a cooking spray instead of oil. Or you can always opt for the traditional meat and potatoes dinner—but cut down on portions and start the meal off with a vegetable soup or salad. It's simple to enjoy potatoes guilt-free during Pesach or any other time of the year. All it takes is a little balancing act! ■

Notes

1. Margaret A. Honein, et al., "Impact of Folic Acid Fortification of the US Food Supply on the Occurrence of Neural Tube Defects," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 285 (2001): 2981-2986

2. Ellie Whitney and Sharon Rady Rolfes, *Understanding Nutrition*, 7th ed. (St. Paul, MN, 1996)
3. JL Slavin, "Position of the American Dietetic Association: Health Implications of Dietary Fiber," *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* 108 (2008): 1716-1731
4. Dale A. Schoeller and Andrea C. Buchholz, "Energetics of Obesity and Weight Control: Does Diet Composition Matter?" *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* 105 (2005): S24-S28
5. *Understanding Nutrition*
6. "Energetics of Obesity and Weight Control"
7. USDA Nutrient Data Laboratory, US Department of Agriculture, <http://www.nal.usda.gov/fnic/food-comp/search/> (accessed December 6, 2008)
8. Ibid.
9. Dietary Reference Intake Tables, Institute of Medicine, <http://www.iom.edu/Object.File/Master/21/372/0.pdf> (accessed December 2, 2008)
10. Ibid.

	White Potato (medium: 2 1/4"-3 1/4" diameter) ⁷	Sweet Potato (medium: 2" diameter) ⁸	Daily Reference Intakes for Men (19-70 years) ⁹	Daily Reference Intakes for Women (19-70 years) ¹⁰
Calories	130	103	Varies	Varies
Carbohydrates (grams)	29	24	130	130
Dietary fiber (grams)	3	4	38 (30 grams/day for ages 51-70)	25 (21 grams/day for ages 51-70)
Protein (grams)	3	2	56	46
Total fat (grams)	0	0	20%-35% of total calories	
Saturated fat (grams)	0	0	As low as possible while consuming a nutritionally adequate diet	
Cholesterol (milligrams)	0	0	As low as possible while consuming a nutritionally adequate diet	
Sodium (milligrams)	10	41	1500 (1300 mg/day for ages 51-70)	1500 (1300 mg/day for ages 51-70)
Vitamin A (Retinol Activity Equivalents)	1	1096	900	700
Vitamin C (milligrams)	17	22	90	75
Folate (micrograms)	52	7	400	400
Potassium (milligrams)	751	542	4700	4700

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