



### Don't fall for questionable 'carbo' labels

Nutriphobia (fear of a nutrient) seems to be a common malady in the United States. Many people suffering from the condition have switched their fear from fat to carbohydrate. As a result, a large low-carbohydrate food product industry has grown to support and promote the fears.

Some companies are creatively labeling their products, using new terms. In addition to listing the legally required amount of total carbohydrate, they are adding such terms as "effective carbs," "net carb count," "net impact carbs," etc.

**Question:** What do these "carbo" terms mean?

**Answer:** There are no officially approved definitions. According to information from low-carb product manufacturers, the terms are intended to indicate the amount of carbohydrate in their product that can affect blood sugar levels and stimulate the release of insulin.

Food labeling regulations require the "Nutrition Facts" panel to list "total carbohydrate," which primarily includes com-

bined amounts of starch, sugar, sugar alcohols and dietary fiber. A term such as "net carbs" subtracts dietary fiber and sugar alcohol from the total, with the intent to indicate that the "effective carbohydrate" amount (starch and sugar) is lower than the "total carbohydrate" listed.

**Q:** Are these carbohydrate claims legal?

**A:** No. Currently, no carbohydrate claims are approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

**Q:** What are sugar alcohols?

**A:** Among the most common are sorbitol and xylitol. They provide a sweet taste that is preferred over most of the no-calorie sugar substitutes. You'll often find them used in sugarless gum.

Although sugar alcohols provide calories similar to those in sugar and are converted to blood sugar (glucose) in the body, they are absorbed much more slowly and are less likely to boost blood sugar levels in the manner of common sugar or starch.

Because they are absorbed more slowly, products using the industry-generated terminology do not count them as "effective carbs." But legally, sugar alcohols may be listed separately or as "other carbohydrate."

It should be noted that when too much sugar alcohol is consumed at one time, the compounds are not efficiently absorbed, resulting in uncomfortable flatulence and diarrhea.

Another compound commonly used to sweeten these products is glycerine, a food additive normally used in much smaller amounts to help foods hold moisture. It tastes sweet, provides calories similar to sugar and can be converted into sugar in the body. Apparently, because glycerine does not start out as sugar, the low-carb food industry does not count it as an "effective carb."

Healthy or not, low-carb diets are popular. These creative approaches to labeling are certain to undergo federal scrutiny that will lead to consistent standards based on science.

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