

By Gwyn Lim

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Lifestyle

How to reduce your carb intake with these easy food swaps

From using zucchini instead of spaghetti, to opting for cauliflower instead of mashed potatoes, you can cut back on carbohydrates without necessarily giving up on your favourite dishes.



Skip the flavoured yoghurt and go for natural yoghurt with berries. (Photo: Pixabay/Enlaidung_Zum_Essen)

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SINGAPORE: Char kway teow, burgers, late-night prata – healthy eating can be tough with all the delicious but calorie-laden food that surrounds you.

In food-mad Singapore, it might seem unthinkable to even consider putting a stop to indulging in your guilty pleasures, like pasta, and perhaps your little one's favourite food, French fries.

Many of us here consume a large amount of grain products, ranging from rice and oats, to bread. Citing the My Healthy Plate recommendations by the Health Promotion Board, accredited nutritionist Chan Joy Seng, director of Alive Nutrition Consultancy points out that grains should form a quarter of our diet. However, he adds, most people exceed this amount.

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Many people aim to eat fewer carbs for the purpose of losing weight. However, cutting carbs has many other benefits too.

Nutritionist Pooja Vig, founder of The Nutrition Clinic, says that the biggest benefits she sees in clinic are a “significant shift in energy, cravings, mood and weight”. Chan adds that the “reduction of sugar consumption can reduce the incidence of tooth decay.”

You have a win-win solution, however – instead of rejecting your favourite carb-laden dishes, why not just substitute some ingredients in the dish and consume fewer calories. Check out these food hacks to reduce any guilt you usually feel while you’re enjoying your favourite meals.

1. ZUCCHINI AS SPAGHETTI

Zucchini noodles, also known as zoodles, is a delicious low carb alternative to spaghetti! Simply use a spiralizer to convert zucchini into thin, noodle-like strands – it’s up to you if you prefer to eat them uncooked or sauteed.

2. KONJAC NOODLES FOR THICK YELLOW NOODLES

This noodle, widely known as the shirataki noodle, is made from glucomannan, a fibre from the konjac root, a yam-like plant. It’s also commonly used to make konnyaku jellies. Very low in calories, it also lowers cholesterol and reduces blood sugar levels. However, some people experience side effects such as diarrhoea and bloating as well. While konjac noodles probably is the best food to consume regularly, it can make a good low-carb replacement occasionally.

3. CAULIFLOWER/BROWN RICE INSTEAD OF WHITE RICE

Grate some cauliflowers to get cauliflower rice, a low-carb replacement for rice. Believe it or not, each head of cauliflower has only 29 grams of carbs. Simply mix it with soy sauce, spring onions and whatever other seasonings you like for a tasty rice substitute as well! Another replacement for white rice is brown rice. Brown rice isn’t just lower in calories and more filling than white rice, it is highly nutritious and good for your health. Chan mentions that “a smaller portion of brown rice can be consumed in place of white rice to give the same fullness, which reduces the calories consumption”.

4. CAULIFLOWERS AS MASHED POTATOES

For a low-carb substitute to mashed potatoes, all you need is to mash some cauliflowers. In fact, the texture of these mashed cauliflowers duplicates of the original mashed potato, just boasting far fewer carbs.

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First-timers may not think much of using vegetables to replace their favourite dishes. Chan suggests making a list of vegetables that you like and dislike and begin swapping your grains with the greens you like first, then slowly adding vegetables you dislike into your diet.

Pooja recommends adding a lot of flavor to spice up the dishes. She suggests serving “zucchini noodles with a robust bolognese, and adding some grass-fed butter and miso to cauliflower mash”.

5. LEMON OR FLAVOURED WATER INSTEAD OF SOFT DRINKS

To most of us, soda or soft drinks are tasty and really refreshing to drink, especially after a long day, but it’s also very unhealthy. In fact, Pooja notes that their sugar content isn’t the only issue with soda — sugar-less drinks with artificial sweeteners are just as harmful. She adds that studies show artificial sweeteners actually cause weight gain, as they “have an impact on blood sugar levels, and the balance of gut microbiome”.

So, a much healthier and carb-cutting option is to substitute your soda with refreshing lemon water or flavoured water. Mr Chan also says that for fans of soft drinks, “sparkling water can be a healthier alternative as there is no added sugar or additives.”

6. DARK CHOCOLATES INSTEAD OF SWEETS AND NORMAL CHOCOLATES

This may be the most delicious fix yet — take dark chocolate in place of candy and normal chocolates. Eating dark chocolate also helps get your taste buds used to food with a lower sugar content.

7. STEVIA INSTEAD OF SUGAR

Instead of sugar that’s high in calories, why not switch to stevia, a plant-based sugar substitute? It’s the perfect solution as this sweetener contains zero calories.

8. LETTUCE WRAP INSTEAD OF BURGER BUN

Don’t eat your burger with the regular buns, use some lettuce to wrap the patty and the other contents — makes for a healthy and still satisfying meal.

9. NATURAL YOGHURT WITH FRESH BERRIES INSTEAD OF FLAVOURED YOGHURT

Even though yoghurt is always perceived as really healthy, yoghurt with artificial flavouring actually contains a lot of sugar. Indulge in a much healthier treat when you eat natural yoghurt that’s topped with berries.

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10. CUCUMBER SLICES AS CRISPS

Snack much more healthily on sliced cucumber. This way, you can enjoy the same satisfying crunch that you get with crisps. If you think it's too bland, prepare dips of your choice as an accompaniment.

11. EGGS AND MASHED BANANA INSTEAD OF REGULAR PANCAKE MIX

While pancakes always sound like a good breakfast idea, they are pretty far from being healthy foods. All you need is two eggs and a mashed banana to make yourself a lower carb pancake.

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