HIGHER HEIGHTS FITNESS

BRECKSVILLE, OHIO

Carbs: How Much You Actually Need — and What It Looks Like

Carbohydrate gets blamed for a lot, but if you're training regularly it isn't something to avoid — it's fuel, and it plays a direct role in nervous system and gut regulation too. Here's a realistic target, and what it actually looks like on a plate. No food scale required.

01 HOW MANY CARBS DO YOU ACTUALLY NEED?

The federal minimum (130g/day) is a floor built to keep your brain fueled at rest — not a target for someone training. On the other end, endurance athletes training hours a day need 8–12g per kilogram of bodyweight — that's not you either. For someone strength training a few times a week, the sports-nutrition literature lands on roughly **3–7 grams per kilogram of bodyweight per day**, with most people doing best in the **4–6 g/kg** range.

130 lb	**~235–350g**
170 lb	**~305–460g**
210 lb	**~380–570g**

Ranges reflect the 3–7 g/kg sports-nutrition range for recreational training (Burke et al., 2011; ACSM/AND/DC joint position, 2016). Ask your coach for a number tightened to your exact bodyweight and goals.

02 WHAT THAT LOOKS LIKE ON YOUR PLATE

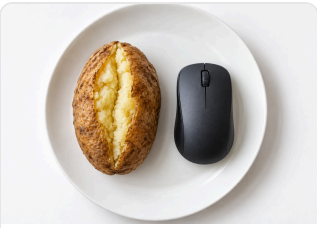
A gram target is only useful if you can actually hit it without weighing food every day. Here's what four common carb sources actually look like, shown next to something you already know the size of.



1 cup cooked white rice

45g

A rounded double handful — about the size of a tennis ball



1 medium baked potato

with skin

37g

About the size of a computer mouse, or your fist



1 cup cooked pasta

38g

A closed fist



1 cup cooked oats

28g

A tennis-ball-sized bowlful

Gram values from USDA FoodData Central. Scale comparisons are practical estimates for a quick eyeball, not lab-exact measurements.

PRACTICAL CARB PRIORITIES

- **Spread it across the day** — a serving at most meals beats one huge "carb meal" to plan around.
- **Favor whole-food sources** most of the time — rice, potatoes, oats, fruit, beans — they carry fiber and nutrients a gram count alone doesn't capture.
- **Pair post-workout carbs with protein** to restock glycogen and support muscle repair together.
- **Don't chase the number over consistency.** Close and repeatable beats exact but sporadic.

03 WHY THIS MATTERS FOR THE NERVOUS SYSTEM & GUT

Carbs aren't just workout fuel — they're directly tied to how regulated your nervous system feels day to day. When blood sugar drops too low, the brain treats it as an emergency: glucose-sensing regions in the hypothalamus and brainstem trigger a real adrenaline and cortisol release to force blood sugar back up. That's a documented stress response — it's the same physiology behind the shaky, irritable, "hangry" feeling of under-fueling. Carbs also indirectly support brain serotonin: eating them triggers insulin release, which clears competing amino acids out of the bloodstream and gives tryptophan an easier path across the blood-brain barrier to become serotonin.

And most of these same carb sources carry fiber, which feeds the bacteria in your gut that produce short-chain fatty acids — compounds that talk directly to the vagus nerve, the main line of communication between your gut and your nervous system. Cut carbs too aggressively for too long and research links it to a less diverse gut microbiome and lower short-chain fatty acid production. Done reasonably, carbs support both.

SOURCES

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