

Do Carbohydrates Make You Fat?

You bet, says a hot new diet book. So is the key to weight loss here at last?



Watching Leighton Steward pick his way through dinner is like watching someone mambo across a minefield. So far the author of *Sugar Busters*, the nation's hottest diet

book, has dodged the rolls in the bread basket, poked aside a carrot garnish, refused potatoes and couscous, and declined dessert.

But now this. Coffee has arrived, and with it the inevitable tray of sugar. Steward looks as if he were overcome by an unpleasant smell. Evidently our waiter has missed the tiny pin glittering on Steward's lapel: a picture of a sugar cube with a red slash through it. The *Sugar Busters* talisman.

Meet America's most unlikely diet guru. He has had no medical education, he does not exercise, and

he is not especially thin. Leighton Steward, 63, is a sweet, talkative New Orleans oilman famous—until now—among other petroleum executives for a quixotic crusade against foods he believes are making America fat. Long before he became a diet dignitary, Steward was buttonholing friends at cocktail parties and wagging his finger at golfing buddies. Wherever he went, free autographed copies of *Sugar Busters*, the folksy treatise he published with three local doctors, flew from his briefcase like beads at Mardi Gras.

If ever a place needed a diet, New Orleans is it. Steward's hometown has an obesity rate of 37.5 percent—by one recent estimate, the highest in the nation. As a trickle of testimonials turned into a gusher, Steward's unorthodox weight-loss plan caught on. Soon *Sugar Busters* was in every drugstore and corner market in New Orleans. The sugar-with-a-slash endorsement blossomed on the menus of the city's



Bran Buds for Your Heart

Foods containing psyllium can now brag that they help prevent heart disease, says the Food and Drug Administration. The ruling was based on studies showing that psyllium, a soluble fiber, lowered bad cholesterol by 5 percent over six months. Kellogg's Bran Buds was one of the first food products to include psyllium. None serving a day is all you need, but other cereals will soon follow suit.

The Buzz About Green Tea

If you're drinking green tea for an antioxidant boost, be prepared for another kick: caffeine. Some green teas are labeled "herbal," usually a code word meaning caffeine-free. But green and black teas come from the same plant; they're just processed and aged differently. Still, green tea's caffeine is only one-third that of black tea.

Snackwell Bulks Up

For those who shun Snackwell's cookies because they're just too, well, lean, it's time to reconsider. After watching sales drop last year, Snackwell rejiggered its munchies to make most of them reduced fat instead of low-fat or fat-free. But at half the fat of regular brands, they're still a good deal, cookie for cookie.

Nuts About Oil?

To order unusual nut oils—from peanut to pumpkin seed, and some of them roasted—call Loriva at 800/945-6748 or visit the Web site at www.loriva.com.

Look It Up

What's the best source of vitamin E? Which has less fat: chicken thighs or flank steak? The *Wellness Nutrition Counter* (Times Books, 1998, \$35) can tell you this and more. It offers basic nutritional data such as calories and fat grams, plus the amounts of essential vitamins and minerals in more than 6,000 brand name and whole foods.



Fishy Fats

Salmon lovers, take note: If you're eating the fish for its heart-healthy omega-3 fatty acids, look for the type that was caught in the wild. Farmed salmon contain as much, if not more, saturated fat as omega-3s. Other farmed fish such as trout and catfish also contain more saturated fat than the ones you'd catch yourself. —KATE LEE

most famous restaurants. By last spring Steward's primer had sold a whopping 210,000 copies; by the end of summer, it was a coast-to-coast best-seller, the latest in a series of diet books feeding a national epidemic of carbophobia.

"If someone had ever told me that I'd write a book that made the best-seller lists, I'd have said they were crazy," chuckles Steward as he pours a packet of artificial sweetener into his coffee. He's not the only one who has been taken aback by the book's success. On its way to the top, *Sugar Busters* has left prominent nutritionists in tears.

Underpinning the book is a complicated hypothesis that Steward says he began to piece together late one night while watching TV in bed. He had just lost 25 pounds on a diet that included omelettes every morning and plenty of beef. "I was eating more calories than I'd ever eaten," he says. Intrigued, Steward started reading about glucose, or blood sugar, and its relationship to insulin, an important hormone produced in the pancreas.

When you eat carbohydrates in foods such as fruits, vegetables, bread, and pasta, the level of glucose begins to rise in your blood. Glucose is a major source of energy for the body. But before it can be used, it has to get from the bloodstream to liver, fat, and muscle cells. That's where insulin comes in: It shuttles the glucose to its destinations.

But the hormone has a secondary housekeeping job, too. Insulin ratchets up the liver's production of blood fats and helps carry them into the adipose cells adorning your waist, thighs, and other fleshy hot spots. Most scientists doubt that this process itself creates beer bellies and flabby thighs, but Steward's late-night epiphany transcended conventional thinking. "Insulin makes you fat," he declares. "That's what doctors don't generally appreciate. It's right there in the medical textbooks."

Forget about calories, says *Sugar Busters* doctrine. To lose weight, you must avoid those carbohydrates known to sharply increase blood glucose levels and thus the need for insulin. What's being busted here, of course, isn't just table sugar. White flour, white rice, and most pastas are also no-no's. So are such seemingly innocent foods as potatoes, corn, carrots, and beets. Partly because these foods have relatively little fiber and lots

The Proven Way to Lose Weight

Take it from the true experts, people who have lost at least 30 pounds and stayed at their new weight for a year or more. Members of the National Weight Control Registry, an ongoing project that tracks successful dieters, describe their commonsense strategies for maintaining a slimmer physique.

Don't deprive yourself. Whenever you deny yourself whole groups of foods, which is what *Sugar Busters* prescribes, the likelier you are to become frustrated and end up indulging. So eat what you want, just eat less of it.

Have several mini-meals a day. To keep from getting too hungry, registry members ate an average of nearly five times a day. Sticking to this schedule, they said, was one of their most useful tactics.

Lighten up on fats. It's the easiest way to cut calories, which is the real goal of any diet. That's because fat delivers nine calories per gram to carbohydrate's four. Registry dieters got about 24 percent of their daily calories from fat.

Exercise regularly. Study after study confirms that being active is the most efficient way to keep weight off in the long run. Also, by burning extra calories, working out helps to compensate for the metabolic slowdown often triggered by eating less.

Take stock. Make sure your goal is realistic; otherwise you'll just set yourself up for failure. And plan for the long haul. To maintain a healthy weight, most people need to change the way they eat forever, not just for the next six months.

of starch or natural sugar, they are absorbed readily in the gut and transformed quickly into blood glucose.

"If you're on a high-carbohydrate diet, you're going to have a lot of insulin in your system," Steward says. "We're telling people to eat carbohydrates but to get high-fiber ones, which are absorbed more slowly." On the approved list: beans, peas, citrus fruits, and apples, to name a few.

Because neither protein nor fat raises blood glucose the way carbohydrates do, the plan also grants surprising amounts of meat (including, for the adventurous dieter, alligator, antelope, and elk), eggs, and dairy products. Steward's book recommends a chocolate mousse, for example, made with five eggs and a quart and a half of heavy cream. Emeril's, one of New Orleans's plummier dining rooms, offers a *Sugar Busters*-approved filet mignon stuffed with blue cheese and sitting atop a bacon salad. This is a very New Orleans kind of diet.

Steward admits that much of the book's weight-loss strategy is "theoretical," but scientists have been less charitable. "It's sheer nonsense," says Gerald Reaven of Stanford University, who years ago was the first researcher to point out the effects of different carbohydrates on blood glucose. "There's absolutely no support in the scientific data."

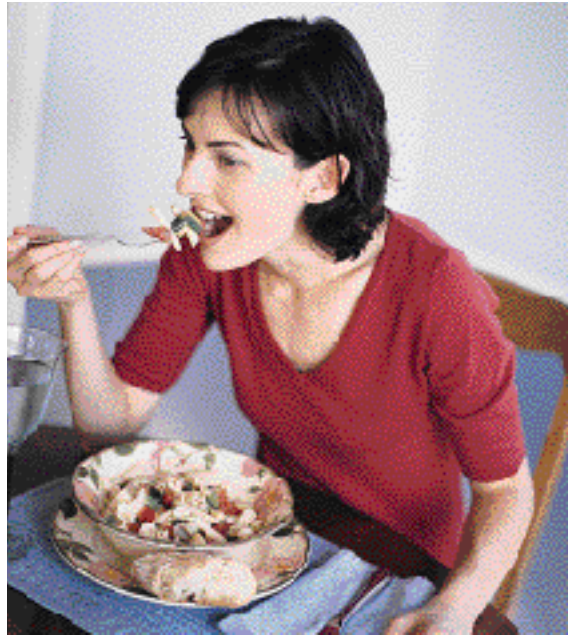
Even assuming that insulin does help create flab—and the notion is controversial—most people just don't secrete more of the hormone than they need. "If you're normal," Reaven explains, "your body metabolizes glucose brilliantly. It takes just a whiff of insulin." Not only that, he adds, simply swapping one carbohydrate for another—beans for potatoes, for example—won't dramatically lower your insulin levels.

Still, some people do have chronically elevated amounts of the hormone in their blood, the result of a condition called insulin resistance. Many with the syndrome are also overweight. But that doesn't mean those bulges came from eating too many potatoes. While *Sugar*

Busters describes obesity as the result of insulin resistance, many experts believe the opposite.

"People just eat too much, period, and they don't exercise," says nutritionist Thomas Wolever of the University of Toronto, who has studied the effect of various foods on blood glucose. "Then, I think, obesity gives them high insulin, not the other way around."

And virtually no scientist believes that calories are a moot issue. "We are getting fatter," says Reaven, "and it is coming from carbohydrates. But the problem



isn't the carbohydrates per se; it's that we eat too much of them and take in way too many calories."

Ironically, *Sugar Busters* proves the point. According to a recent analysis, an average day on the plan provides merely 1,200 calories. This may be the book's big secret: It's a low-calorie diet in disguise. And with its emphasis on fiber, that may well be a good thing.

Still, there's a downside. Any diet that relies this heavily on meat and full-fat dairy—without being specific about portions—is likely to bring with it a hefty load of artery-clogging saturated fat. And when you cut back on carbohydrates like fruits and vegetables, you're losing important vitamins and minerals your body needs to stay healthy.

Want to lose weight? Watch those calories, lighten up on fats, and make an effort to exercise. There aren't any shortcuts, not even on Bourbon Street. ■