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CARBS! It's What Fuels Michael Phelps's Olympic Fire

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*Janet Bond Brill, Ph.D., R.D., LDN, nutritionist and author of **Cholesterol DOWN** (Three Rivers Press), has spent many years counseling patients on wellness, weight loss, and cardiovascular prevention. Her work has been published in the **International Journal of Obesity** and the **International Journal of Sport Nutrition**. Dr. Brill maintains a private practice specializing in cardiovascular disease prevention, and also privately consults on nutrition with such clients as Proctor & Gamble and The Sports Club LA-Miami.*

Janet Brill--

In Wednesday's (8/13/08) *Sun-Sentinel*, the reigning super Olympian and Boy Wonder Michael Phelps was asked about his dietary habits. His response was, "Lots of carbs."

Phelps's comment provides further evidence that carbs are truly the fuel of choice for the elite gold medal athletes among us. Which leads me to the topic at hand: that carbs have gotten a bad rap and it's time to set the record (Olympic? world?) straight.

There are three types of macronutrients that supply energy (calories) for the human body: carbohydrates, fat, and protein. When it comes to eating for good health, it's all in the balance, and "good" carbs should be the foundation of the diet, with a nice dose of added "healthy fats" and a smaller amount of lean protein. Carbohydrates are the most widely eaten food in the world and *should comprise the bulk of any and all healthy diets*, as carbs are truly the staff of life. Carbs supply quick energy for the muscles. Plus, if you eat the good whole-grain carbs, you get the added benefits of fiber, loads of vitamins and minerals, and tons of important phytonutrients (antioxidants and natural cholesterol-lowering phytosterols, for example). The best sources of "good" carbs are whole grains, fruits, vegetables, and beans.

So how much is enough? For the mere mortals among us (inactive or modestly active), carbohydrates should make up at least 50% of our total caloric intake. For the

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dedicated athlete (especially endurance athletes like swimmers, cyclists, and

runners), carbs should make up at least 60% of their total calorie intake. Elite athletes are different. During peak training, elite endurance athletes often increase their carb intake to 70%, a necessary adjustment to give them the extra energy and nutrition required to train at an optimal level.

When my patients tell me that carbs are fattening, I always tell them to look at Lance Armstrong, who in the months leading up to the Tour de France routinely ate a 60% to 70% carbohydrate diet. If carbs make you fat, then why is he one of the leanest, fittest humans on the planet? Carbs are not fattening; too many calories, regardless of the source—excess carbs, fat, or protein—are what put on the pounds. So follow the lead of the great athletes among us: Eat a healthy higher carbohydrate, moderate fat, and protein diet and get that daily exercise in.

[The Nutrition of Olympians--When Food Is Really Fuel](#)

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