Title
In defense of carbohydrates: don't worry about trends but trust your intuition to eat right

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In Defense of Carbohydrates

*Worried about the latest trendy diet? Don’t. Here’s some advice about carbs, protein, and your own intuition about how to sustain a healthy dancer body*

by Emily Hoff

“Would you like to add a protein?”

“Would you like that protein-style?”

“10 everyday swaps to cut carbs!”

From Atkins to paleo to tracking macros, we live in a world where carbohydrates are feared and protein reigns. Especially among athletes and fitness enthusiasts, ideas about health center around protein and carbohydrates have a bad reputation, one that I firmly believe they do not deserve. The entire idea of ranking macronutrients (carbohydrates, protein, and fat) is strange in the first place—they all serve important and specific purposes in the body and are all needed for nourishment. But these rankings absolutely exist and have existed for a long time. From the complete rejection of fat in the past generation to the low-carb, high-fat, and protein diets of the present, it is clear how pervasive these ideas are.

Especially for dancers, people notorious for caring about what they eat, these ideas can firmly take root and dictate the way people live their lives in ways that are not always beneficial. I encourage dancers to loosen their grip on these “nutrition rules” and embrace all the nutrients, and more importantly, all the tastes and pleasures that nature has to offer. I use the findings in this article to challenge today’s fad diets and to present an alternate point of view; however, I also encourage dancers to trust their bodies and intuition more than any nutritional study. Dancers spend endless hours tuning in to their bodies in class, finding what feels good and what works for them. I encourage us all to do the same thing in the kitchen—we can all benefit from paying more attention to our embodied knowledge.

There is a current perception, made stronger by trendy diet and nutrition ideas, that carbohydrates are unhealthy and that protein overshadows carbohydrates and fat as the most important of the three macronutrients. Dancers tend to be very mindful of what they eat and are often looking for ways to improve their performance in class and onstage, so it is not surprising that these ideas permeate the lives of dancers in especially strong ways. As Jacquelyn R. Braisted mentioned in her writing on eating choices in young dancers, an idea that was very common with all dancers interviewed was that protein was very important to eat before dancing, but that eating carbohydrates would not result in any improvement in performance (Braisted et al 368-370). These ideas are problematic not only because nutritionally they are likely flawed, but also because they can lead to or further restrictive eating patterns that are very unhealthy.

First, take a closer look at the idea that protein is important for improving performance and that carbohydrates are not. Before we consider dancers, it is important to look at the protein needs of “normal” people. Surprise! Almost no one is deficient in protein—less than 3 percent of
the population is protein deficient (RRP 150). Protein deficiency is often posed as an imminent threat, something that can easily happen to anyone who is not carefully tracking their intake, but this is not the case at all. Historically, animal protein has held cultural significance, which shaped the way that the field of nutrition developed in ways that still have an effect today. As biochemist J. Campbell pointed out in the famous China Study, “If you were rich, you ate meat, and if you were poor, you ate staple plant foods, like potatoes and bread… Elitism and arrogance dominated much of the burgeoning field of nutrition in the nineteenth century. The entire concept that bigger is better, more civilized and perhaps even more spiritual permeated every thought about protein” (Campbell 28). As with everything, nutrition reflects the culture and norms at the time in which it was developed, and eventually ideas are taken as facts, even though they might not be true.

These findings about carbohydrates being beneficial for long-term health are appealing, but are they convincing enough to change the way dancers think about nutrition? After all, we exercise a lot. Surely we need extra protein to account for how much we use our muscles? Yes—but not as much as we think. Rich Roll discusses this with Dr. Garth Davis in his podcast “Our Misplaced Obsession with Protein.” Athletes and other people who are very, very active probably do need to pay a little bit more attention to their protein intake than other people, but this can be achieved easily with unprocessed protein that comes from plant foods (RRP 150). After all, if only 3 percent of the population is protein deficient and most of our ideas about the importance of meat come from nineteenth century social values, it follows that most people need not pay any attention at all to their protein intake, and that athletes only need to concentrate on it a little bit. In other words, the pounds of meat and gallons of protein shakes are just not necessary.

But what about performance? Even though Campbell might have it figured out for long-term health, what about right now? Will pumping up with protein help me dance better for my performance today? Also, no. Protein will help your muscles recover afterwards, but studies have shown that a high-protein diet does not lead to higher performance. One study on a very low carb diet designed to put the body into a state of ketosis (a state where it is running on fat) found that this diet resulted neither in increased performance nor in increased weight loss, the two very goals of the diet (RRP 150). Another study on rats fed either a diet high in animal protein or low in animal protein found that the rats fed less animal protein chose to exercise more and showed less fatigue when they did (Campbell 24). Similar studies done on world-class athletes show the exact same reaction as the rats to the high and low protein diets, which suggests that dancers would react in a similar way (Campbell 24). All of these studies are especially relevant to dancers because they do not look at bodies functioning at a low level of activity, but rather show that even during high levels of physical activity, bodies perform best with a diet low in animal protein.

So what does this mean for dancers in regard to their nutrition? In general, probably that they should relax. It will always be a good idea to eat wholesome, fresh, minimally processed food, but beyond that, many of us probably do not need to worry as much as we do. As Braisted and Davis pointed out, it is much more likely that dancers are not eating enough than that they are not eating enough protein. Protein is important, but so are carbohydrates and fat, and so is enjoyment. Every nutrient has its place and a wholesome and varied diet including lots of plant foods will easily cover most of dancers’ needs. Focusing on an abundance of colorful, fresh fruits and vegetables as well as nuts, legumes, and whole grains, as well as taking time to enjoy
foods you truly love, will ensure a diet full of fiber and vitamins with minimal effort and with lots of enjoyment.

Lastly, dancers’ bodies are not machines. Yes, our bodies work hard and are trained, but we are also living, breathing people. Eating for fuel has its place but so does eating for enjoyment. Our intuition can tell us a lot about what we should be eating, much more than the latest trendy diet or popular study. Even more important than the argument of whether protein or carbohydrates are better fuel for dancers is the reality that each body is smart and every person should feel empowered to make their own food choices and to enjoy the things that they love without guilt or pressure. Ultimately, the best diet is different for every dancer and can only truly be discovered by listening to, and trusting, your body.

Works Cited


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