What is Glycemic Index?
Every time we eat a carbohydrate food, such as pasta, potatoes, yogurt, cereal or fruit, our bodies convert carbohydrate to glucose for energy. Once upon a time we thought all carbohydrate foods were the same. We now know there is a difference in how quickly they are digested by the body. The Glycemic Index (GI) is a measure of how quickly these carbohydrate-rich foods are broken down into glucose and raise our blood glucose levels. Foods are ranked out of 100, with slowly digested carbohydrates classified as low GI (55 or less) and quickly digested carbohydrates as high GI (70 or more).

Benefits of eating the low-GI way
Eating high-GI foods can lead to energy ups and downs as the glucose reaches your bloodstream quickly (i.e. the sugar hit), but it doesn’t last for long. You could find yourself reaching for more snacks to bump up your energy levels again. Low-GI foods give you more steady energy levels across the day, helping to avoid the ‘slump’. With more constant energy levels, you may find you aren’t as hungry.

“In fact, there is very strong evidence that healthy low-GI diets are the most effective way of losing body weight, and more importantly, body fat,” says dietitian and author Alan Barclay. “There is growing evidence that low-GI diets can help prevent type 2 diabetes, heart disease and certain cancers.”

How can I tell the GI of a food?
Not all carbohydrate foods have their GI measured. Foods that carry the GI logo have been tested and meet the criteria set out by the GI Symbol team. So look out for the GI logo in the supermarket.

How can I lower the GI of my diet?
Getting the benefits from low-GI eating is easy! Simply swap some of your carbohydrate foods for low-GI choices using the examples in the table on page 2. An easy way to lower the GI of your diet is to include one low-GI food at each meal and snack — for example, adding a low-GI food like baked beans to a high-GI food like potato will help to reduce the overall GI of the meal. It is important to remember that portion size counts. Just because it’s low-GI, doesn’t mean you can eat as much as you like. Eating too many kilojoules, even if they are from low GI carbohydrates, can still lead to weight gain.

Are all carbs bad for me?
There are plenty of myths out there about carbohydrates. The most common one is that carbohydrates are fattening. Protein, fat and carbohydrates all contain kilojoules, and if you eat too much of any of them without burning the energy, you can gain weight. Carbohydrates are actually the preferred energy source for your brain and working muscles, plus they have half the energy of fat. So include plenty of good-quality carbs in your diet like wholegrain breads and cereals, fruit and reduced-fat dairy, but remember to watch your overall kilojoule intake as well.

GI mini-quiz
How much do you know about GI? Take our quick quiz to find out then see below to see how you did.

Q1: All low-GI foods are healthy.
True or false?
Q2: Is the GI of chicken:
   a) Low
   b) Medium
   c) High
   d) None of the above?
Q3: One of the benefits of a low-GI eating plan is:
   a) It is lower in carbohydrates
   b) It helps manage blood-glucose levels
   c) It means you don’t have to count calories

Answers to GI mini-quiz
1: False. Some foods that have a low GI, may be high in fat or salt. Therefore GI is not always an indicator of a healthier food choice. When it comes to healthy eating, the kilojoule (or calorie), fat, saturated fat and sodium content of a food need to be considered. Your choices should not be solely based on GI but also on recommendations to reduce saturated fat and increase fruit, vegetables and fibre.
2: d) GI can only be measured in food containing carbohydrates. Chicken contains protein and fat, but not much carbohydrate, therefore it does not have a GI ranking.
3: b) Low-GI foods release glucose gradually into the bloodstream helping to manage blood glucose levels. Low-GI foods are carbohydrate foods, but they are not lower in carbohydrate than high-GI foods. Low-GI foods can have just as many kilojoules as high-GI foods, so just because it’s low-GI, doesn’t mean you can eat as much as you like. The overall kilojoules in your diet are still important to keep track of.
The following table shows different foods that are high, medium and low GI.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FOOD</th>
<th>LOW GI (GI 55 OR LESS)</th>
<th>MEDIUM GI (GI 56-59)</th>
<th>HIGH GI (GI 70 OR MORE)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BREAD</td>
<td>multiflour, low-GI white and sourdough breads</td>
<td>pita and rye breads</td>
<td>white/wholemeal bread, crumpets, English muffins, pikelets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GRAINS PASTA</td>
<td>pasta, barley, noodles, Moolgi rice</td>
<td>Doongara and Basmati rice</td>
<td>Calrose and jasmine rice, rice cakes, water crackers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEREALS</td>
<td>natural muesli, rolled oats, bran-based breakfast cereals</td>
<td>most breakfast cereals like puffed rice, corn and wheat flakes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VEGETABLES</td>
<td>corn, carrots, lentils, chick peas, kidney beans, baked beans</td>
<td>beetroot, sweet potato, Nicola potatoes</td>
<td>potato, parsnip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FRUIT</td>
<td>apples, oranges, strawberries, mangoes, pears, peaches</td>
<td>apricots, pineapple, kiwifruit, bananas</td>
<td>watermelon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DAIRY</td>
<td>milk, yogurt, ice cream, custard</td>
<td>soft drinks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWEET TREATS</td>
<td>chocolate</td>
<td>lollies, cup cakes, lamingtons</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References:
4. Ludwig DS. 2000 Dietary glycemic index and obesity. J Nutr 130: 2805-283