

Get Carb



THESE DAYS, carbohydrates (“carbs”) take more blame than traffic jams and homework-consuming pets. They’re avoided, denounced, even vilified. And yet, rarely do we see anyone say no to bread before dinner. And super-“sides” of fries keep growing—as do we! According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, approximately two-thirds of U.S. adults are either overweight or obese.

Smart



The Lowdown on the Low-Carb Craze

A decade ago, fat took the rap. Were carbs the problem all along? And are the headline-grabbing low-carb diets such as Atkins and South Beach the solution? If so, are they safe? Studies released in 2003 suggest that low-carbohydrate diets are both effective and safe in the short term. But in the long run—the race that counts—the jury’s still out regarding safety and success.

Net Losses

Dena M. Bravata, M.D., of the Center for Primary Care and Outcomes Research, Stanford University School of Medicine, sees many patients with the following profile—40 years old, 35 pounds overweight, high cholesterol, high blood pressure.

“This patient might say, ‘All my friends are losing weight on the low-carb diet of the month,’” says Dr. Bravata. “‘Doc, I want to go on that. What do you think?’ And while he or she is relishing the thought

of eating steak and eggs every morning, I’m worried about his or her cholesterol and blood pressure.”

Such exchanges motivated Dr. Bravata to evaluate the safety and success of low-carb diets. The findings were published in the April 2003 *Journal of the American Medical Association*. “Probably the most striking result you saw,” says Dr. Bravata, “was that people on low-carb diets, just as people on low-fat diets, lose weight. And the reason they lose weight on low-carb diets was because they limit calories, not because they limit carbohydrates.”

The Atkins Approach

How does the Atkins Diet work? Initially, the diet severely restricts the intake of carbohydrates, the body’s primary source of fuel. This forces the body into a state of ketosis, where fat is burned instead. Dieters avoid all fruit, bread, pasta, grains and starchy

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vegetables and choose liberally among fats and proteins—red meat, poultry, fish, eggs, cheese and butter. Later stages allow for the slow, gradual re-introduction of carbs into the diet.

But can the Atkins Diet produce faster, more dramatic results? So say two reports in the May 22, 2003, *New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM)*. In a University of Pennsylvania study of 60 obese adults, half followed a low-fat diet; half followed Atkins. Atkins dieters shed significantly more weight after six months. However, at 12 months, group losses were more even.

According to Cindy Moore, M.S., nutrition therapy director at The Cleveland Clinic Foundation, early success on a low-carb diet can be partially explained by glucose depletion in the muscles. “When we use up those glycogen supplies,” says Moore, “we also lose a lot of water.”

The Rise of the Low-Carb King

While low-carbohydrate diets reign as the flavor of the moment, they're hardly a fresh approach. The first low-carb diet booklet was written in 1863 (not by a doctor or dietitian, but—in a somewhat morbid twist of irony—by an undertaker). Even low-carb king

Atkins-friendly products is springing up throughout the nation. Meanwhile, an up-and-coming challenger is the less rigid South Beach Diet, which doesn't count carbs, but rates foods by glycemic index, a measure of how fast they raise blood sugar.

Health Risks and Benefits

Since low-carb diets are so popular, it's important to consider their safety. Health organizations such as the American Dietetic Association and the American Heart Association (AHA) cite concerns of serious health risks, particularly among individuals with heart disease, high cholesterol, high blood pressure or type 2 diabetes. The AHA also warns that people who stay on these diets very long may not be getting enough vitamins and minerals and may face increased risks for developing kidney and liver disorders, and osteoporosis.

On the other hand, “the evidence suggests that, in the short term, meaning 90 days or less,” says Dr. Bravata, “low-carb diets provide successful weight loss for some patients ... without harmful side effects in terms of glucose, insulin, blood pressure or cholesterol.”

In a study of severely obese adults on a low-carb diet, published in the *NEJM*, Frederick F. Samaha, M.D., chief of cardiology at Philadelphia V.A. Medical Center, actually found improvements in blood sugar control, triglyceride levels and insulin resistance. “These favorable effects,” says Dr. Samaha, “may be largely because a lot of individuals were very seriously overeating carbohydrates. However,” he cautions, “further study is required.”

Adds Robert H. Eckel, M.D., professor of medicine at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center, “I think the potential harmful effects [of low-carb diets], such as the effect on bone and kidney stones, may take a greater period of time to become evident.”

Scrambled Messaging

Certainly, long-term obesity poses health risks as well, including type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, heart

disease, high cholesterol and cancer. Given the initial weight-loss boost of a low-carb diet, is it reasonable to start on such a diet—then switch to a balanced, low-fat program? “I'm not sure we're really teaching sound nutritional principles by [doing so],” says Dr. Eckel.

“The only way to lose weight and keep it off is to decide you're going to make some permanent changes,” says Moore of The Cleveland Clinic Foundation. “They don't even have to be big changes”—specifically, she says, regular physical activity and a healthy balanced diet that includes fruits and vegetables, whole grains, low-fat sources of calcium and lean sources of protein.

“Unfortunately,” says Dr. Eckel, “many have taken the low-fat message as a license to overeat carbs—and not necessarily in the form of fruits, vegetables and whole grains, but rather through highly processed foods and sugary snacks.” And just as the low-fat message can be distorted, so can low-carb. “Fish is an excellent source of protein,” says Moore. “Do people usually think about eating fish on [low-carb diets]? No, they think about a cheeseburger with bacon without the bun.”

Weight and See

Clearly, questions remain about the consequences of low-carb diets on cardiovascular health, kidney function and bone health. Answers may come from a study on the long-term effects of the Atkins Diet funded by the National Institutes of Health. Meanwhile, caution prevails in the medical community. “At this time,” says Dr. Eckel, “I think the evidence isn't sufficient to abandon what we know about sound nutrition, even in the setting of weight reduction.”

However, the controversial diets have sparked a worthwhile discussion. “I think the best thing is the attention it has brought to the obesity epidemic in America,” says Dr. Bravata. “The key is that we focus on obesity and try to make inroads into reversing current trends.” ●

Be sure to consult with your personal physician before beginning any diet plan.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For help in developing sound eating and physical activity habits, visit or contact:

American Dietetic Association

www.eatright.org

1-800-877-1600

American Heart Association

www.americanheart.org

1-800-242-8721

Robert Atkins wrote his first book 30-plus years ago.

Similar diets have emerged since, including the Stillman Diet, the Scarsdale Diet and Sugar Busters. But since the appearance of *Dr. Atkins' New Diet Revolution* in 1997, the Atkins Diet has exploded in popularity and attracted a cult-like following. A mega-industry of