

High-Protein, Low-Carb Diets

Are They Right for You?

You've been on a low-fat diet for months with no luck. But your friend has shed 15 pounds on a high-protein, low-carbohydrate diet. She feasts on eggs, cheese and meat, and the pounds are flying off!

Should you give her diet a try? How can you lose weight eating all those "heavy" foods?

High-protein, low-carbohydrate diets may help you lose some weight quickly. That's because they're low in calories. But these diets aren't necessarily the healthiest approach to losing weight and keeping it off.

Carbs vs. Calories

There are several high-protein, low-carbohydrate diet books on the market. Examples include the Zone diet, the Atkins diet, the Carbohydrate Addict's Diet, Sugar Busters and Protein Power.

They're all variations on the same theme – to lose weight, you cut back on foods high in carbohydrates (such as fruit and fruit juices, potatoes, breads, cereals, pasta, rich, starchy vegetables, sweets, soft drinks) and eat mainly protein- and fat-rich foods (meat, fish, eggs, milk and nuts).

The Atkins diet, for example, recommends limiting carbohydrate intake to less than about 50 grams a day. That's roughly the amount in one bagel and only about 25 percent or less of what adults should consume each day.

Why the restriction on carbohydrates? Authors and proponents of low-carbohydrate diets believe that eating carbohydrates

increases levels of the hormone insulin.

Higher insulin levels, they contend, cause more calories to be stored as fat, promoting weight gain. Therefore, if you cut back on carbohydrates, your insulin levels will drop, and you'll lose weight. In addition, they claim that higher insulin levels stimulate appetite.

Most diet and nutrition experts challenge these theories. They say that carbohydrates alone aren't to blame for weight gain. Weight gain results from consuming too many calories – from any source – while burning too few. In addition, scientific research has not confirmed that insulin stimulates appetite.

That said, it is true that eating carbohydrates (and fat and protein) in moderation can aid in losing weight. The key is "moderation." Some low-fat dieters mistakenly load up on carbohydrates – fat-free cookies, sugary sodas and lots of pasta. These foods are low in fat, but not necessarily low in calories. And when it comes to weight loss, calories matter (despite what many of these diet books say).

Do These Diets Work?

Some people do lose weight on these diets. Why? First and foremost, these diets are extremely low in calories. The Zone diet, for example, allows for about 800 to 1,200 calories a day. The recommended caloric intake for the average adult is at least 1,800 to 2,000 calories a day.

In addition, when you first stop eating carbohydrates, your body reacts by releasing water that's stored with your body's supply of carbohydrates. Some of the weight you're losing is water, not fat.

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These diets also help suppress appetite – but not necessarily in a healthy way. Your body depends on carbohydrates for its daily fuel. When you strictly limit carbohydrates, your body burns fat as its fuel and reacts as though it’s starving. A condition called ketosis (kee-TOE-sis) may result. This can cause a loss of appetite, but it may also stress your kidneys.

Ultimately, though, most weight loss on high-protein diets is temporary. The diets can make eating overly complicated and eventually boring. And once you go off the diets, you tend to regain weight.

A Menu of Choices

Are these diets good for you? Mayo Clinic experts say “no.” Most low-carbohydrate diets restrict whole grains, fruits and vegetables – foods linked to prevention of cancer and heart disease. Many of these diets also encourage you to eat meat in place of carbohydrates, and studies have conclusively linked diets high in red meat to various diseases.

Some low-carbohydrate diets also encourage you to eat foods, such as cheese, butter and cream, that are high in saturated fat. But diets high in saturated fat can lead to clogged arteries and increased cancer risk.

In addition, there have been no scientific studies published that show that these diets work for most people or are safe.

If you’re considering a low-carbohydrate diet, discuss it with your doctor. People with diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease or other risk factors for kidney disease should be particularly careful. Kidneys have to work hard to process waste from the break-down of proteins.

If you’re healthy, these diets may not be obviously harmful for a short period, but you may be sacrificing improvements to your long-term health for temporary weight loss.

The Best Plan

To lose weight and keep it off permanently, you should follow a healthy, low-calorie diet. This plan should emphasize whole grains, fruits and vegetables—carbohydrates that are low in calories and high in nutrients.

Your diet should emphasize the right kinds of proteins, such as nuts, soy and beans, lean white meats, such as fish, and reduced portions of red meat. It should be low in saturated fat and instead contain monounsaturated fat (the “good” fat), such as olive oil, canola oil and nuts.

In addition, don’t forget to exercise. Studies suggest that if anything helps to keep unwanted pounds from returning, it’s exercise.

Despite hype to the contrary, a diet that’s well balanced in carbohydrates, proteins and fats is healthful for you.

Choosing the Right Carbohydrate

There is at least one bit of good advice in some low-carbohydrate diets—the recommendation to decrease your sugar intake.

High sugar foods, while high in carbohydrates, are high in calories and low in nutrients. Nutrition experts generally agree that 55 percent to 60 percent of your total daily calories should come from carbohydrates. Make sure yours are the “right” kind. Look for complex carbohydrates that include a good dose of fiber.

These include fruits, vegetables, beans, and whole grains.

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