

## **Low-Carbohydrate Diets: An Effective Long-Term Solution for Weight Loss?**

Low-carbohydrate diets are popular among people trying to lose weight but controversial among weight-loss professionals. Some organizations acknowledge that a low-carbohydrate diet is effective and safe in the short term, while others patently discourage their use.

The American Diabetes Association recently stated that low-carbohydrate diets were an effective short-term solution for weight loss, while the American Dietetic Association and the National Academy of Sciences officially endorse a high-carbohydrate, calorie-restricted diet.

Internationally, the Australian Heart Association, the UK Food Standards Agency, and the Canadian Heart and Stroke Foundation either discourage low-carbohydrate diets or recommend waiting until further studies examine their long-term safety.

### **Beneficial and Harmful Carbohydrates**

Like fatty acids, some carbohydrates are more beneficial than others. Fruits, vegetables, whole grains and legumes are all helpful sources of carbohydrates. Researchers have shown time and time again that these foods are beneficial, if not essential, for human health, but some low-carbohydrate diet plans recommend avoiding these all together.

On the other hand, carbohydrates derived from processed foods, especially those containing partially hydrogenated oils, generally have few nutritional benefits. Even worse, many of these carbohydrate-rich foods are made with trans fatty acids and high fructose corn syrup. Both of these substances have documented negative effects on human health including accelerated weight gain and increased insulin resistance.

Many weight-loss professionals worry that the explosion of low-carbohydrate diets may lead many people to believe that *all* carbohydrates are the source of their burgeoning bellies, and that people will simply replace these foods with other foods high in saturated fat.

### **Benefits of a low-carbohydrate diet**

Several studies have shown that low-carbohydrate diets are effective *in the short term* for weight loss. In 2004, *The Lancet* stated that low-carbohydrate diets “seem safe for short-term use (up to six months) as long as weight loss occurs.”

The source of the protein and carbohydrates seems to play a large part in the long-term health effects of low-carbohydrate diets. A 20-year study from the *New England Journal of Medicine* found that a low-carbohydrate where most protein was derived from vegetable sources moderately reduced the risk of coronary heart disease. Unfortunately, meat and dairy products generally account for a high percentage of caloric intake on a low-carbohydrate diet plan.

## **Dangers of a low-carbohydrate diet**

Despite the benefits, weight-loss professionals remain reserved about recommending a low-carbohydrate diet because of a metabolic state called ketosis. Ketosis occurs when carbohydrate intake is severely restricted. The body begins to burn ketones, energy molecules created by fat cells, instead of glucose, for energy.

While burning energy created by fat cells might sound appealing for anyone trying to lose weight, *long-term* ketosis can lead to hyperuricemia, a condition characterized by high levels of uric acid in the body. Hyperuricemia has been linked to a number of health problems like gout, kidney stones, and kidney failure.

## **Are low-carbohydrate diets a safe way to lose weight?**

The jury is still out on the long-term health effects of a low-carbohydrate diet. In the short-term, low-carbohydrate diets may be an effective way to kick-start a weight-loss plan. However, don't think they're the only way to lose weight, even in the short term.

Reporting the results of a randomized trial, the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* wrote that both low-carbohydrate diets and low-fat diets, when coupled with behavior modification, were *equally effective*. Another meta-analysis from the University of Basel reached a similar conclusion.

Knowing that both low-fat and low-carbohydrate diets are equally effective for weight loss, the best bet for anyone thinking about reducing beneficial and harmful carbohydrates.