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Staying Healthy on a Low Carbohydrate Diet

By Marjorie Geiser

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It is estimated that about 32 million Americans are following some type of low carbohydrate diet. This is the result of fad diet authors claiming that carbohydrates are the cause for America's rising obesity problems. The backlash against carbohydrates is a result of the low fat craze that started in the 80's. When consumers started cutting down their fat intake, manufacturers figured out that they could create low fat processed food products that the public would buy. Because these products claimed to be 'fat free', Americans didn't pay attention to the fact that they were not also 'calorie free', and as a result, the total amount of daily calories has slowly been increasing. In fact, although the total percentage of calories from fat has decreased, the actual amount of fat intake has increased by 10# per year since 1975! The increase of carbohydrate has also increased, at a rate of 20# per year, mostly as a result of highly processed foods.

It is estimated that 3800 calories are now produced for every American man, woman and child. We have evolved from a world of feast or famine, but we're in a state of perpetual feast, although our bodies have not changed. We have no defenses against excess calories: Every year, 300,000 to 400,000 deaths in the US are attributed to obesity.

Meanwhile, Asian and Middle Eastern populations consume 50–75% of their calories from rice and have some of the lowest rates of obesity and heart disease in the world. People living in the Mediterranean also have fewer health conditions commonly seen in the US. This diet consists of whole grains, vegetables, legumes, nuts and fruits. Their diets are rich in fish and low in meats and poultry. Although their fat intake is about the same as in America, the type of fat is primarily monounsaturated fats, such as olive oil, where Americans eat primarily saturated animal fats.

Regardless of the actual advantage or disadvantage to following a low carbohydrate diet, there are three recommendations for maintaining good health while following such a diet. The first is to choose healthy fats over the unhealthy, saturated fats, when considering fat intake. Examples of healthy fats would be plant fats that have not been 'hydrogenated', which makes the fat more solid at room temperature. It is

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believed that hydrogenation is actually more harmful to health than saturated fats found naturally in animal products. Plant fats would include nuts, avocados, and olives. Oils such as olive oil, canola oil and peanut oil are better choices than fats that come from animal sources, such as butter, lard or bacon grease. Multiple studies over the years have shown that excess animal fats lead to higher risks of cancer, heart disease and other inflammatory disorders. Saturated fats have been linked to increased cholesterol, LDL (the 'bad') cholesterol as well as to increased LDL cholesterol oxidation. In fact, in January 2004, an Atkins representative put out a press release advising the public to decrease their amounts of steak, eggs, and saturated fat to less than 20% of their total fat intake.

The next recommendation to ensure good health is to eat plenty of fruits and vegetables. Although fruits and most vegetables are restricted in the initial phase of some low carbohydrate diets, they are then allowed back in limited amounts. The phytonutrients that come from a diet rich in fruits and vegetables have been shown to decrease blood pressure, as well as protect against cancer, heart disease, diabetes, metabolic syndrome, and obesity. It's easy to add more fruits and vegetables to

your diet, once you get in the habit. Examples are; add some berries to breakfast, eat a tomato at lunch, include broccoli with dinner, drink some vegetable juice with snacks, and have a large salad with your meal.

The final tip to ensure good health is to eat a diet of whole foods, rather than fall back on the 'easy' snack, convenience foods of today. If American's had just cut down their amount of fat intake in the 80's, without finding new ways to snack, we may not be seeing the epidemic of obesity we see, today. When people started going on the low carbohydrate diets, they eliminated a large number of calories by eliminating snacking, especially at night, where common snacks are chips, crackers, and other high fat, high refined carbohydrate foods, such as ice cream. Today, though, much like in the 80's, manufacturers are now developing 'low carb' and 'low net carb' snack foods. We can now find 'low net carb' chips, crackers, ice cream, popcorn, even low carb pizza! As Americans start to increase their intake of these foods, we will soon see a slowing of the weight loss many had seen initially. In order to call themselves a 'low net carb' food, manufacturers subtract the fiber and sugar alcohols from the total carbohydrates in the product, rather than produce products without carbohydrate. There is no actual FDA standard for what a "low net carb" food is, yet, though, so right now it's anything the manufacturer wants to say it is. These foods also are very high in fat and saturated fat, usually through hydrogenation. So, not only will calories be added back into the diet through resuming unhealthy snack habits, but they will be calories consisting of high amounts of the unhealthy fats.

So, while following a low carbohydrate diet, in order to ensure continued good health, follow these three recommendations: 1) Make most fats you eat the healthy, plant fats, rather than eating a diet high in animal or hydrogenated fats, 2) Eat plenty of nutrient rich fruits and vegetables, which are high in disease-fighting antioxidants, and 3) eat mostly whole, fresh foods and very little processed snack foods, even if they say 'low carb', in order to avoid hidden and unnecessary fat and calories.

Marjorie Geiser has been teaching health, fitness and nutrition since 1982. She is a nutritionist, registered dietitian, certified personal trainer and life coach. As the owner of MEG Fitness, Marjorie's goal for her clients is to help them incorporate healthy eating and fitness into their busy lives. To order her 30-Day Health & Fitness Challenge e-course and learn more about Marjorie, go to her website at

or email her at

Is Low-Carb Weight Loss Really Just Water Loss?

By Craig Whitley

Any weight loss or diet plan, including low-carb plans like the induction phase of the Atkins Diet will result in water loss during the first week or two. However, one of the real beauties of following a low carbohydrate eating plan is that most of the weight loss than extends beyond the initial induction phase of the diet is really from a drop in fat pounds.

How can this be? Well, when you follow a controlled carbohydrate eating plan like Atkins or the South Beach Diet, your body soon switches from burning carbohydrates (which the diet deprives the body of) to burning fat for energy. In other words, the majority of the weight loss that occurs beyond the initial induction phase is really loss of fat that has been stored in your body.

Contrary to what many skeptics and misinformed persons may report or say, even if your body sheds water during the first few days of a controlled carbohydrate diet plan like the South Beach Diet or Atkins, the body's water balance soon returns to normal and the weight loss that follows is the depletion of fat pounds. This loss of fat reveals itself to one and all in the form declines in inches (your body measurements) and pounds - regardless which low-carb diet you follow.

Craig Whitley is the Senior Editor of "Diets and Weight Loss Plans" - a daily blog for dieters. Visit his website daily to read the latest news and articles on diets, dieting, weight loss and obesity. The URL address for Diets and Weight Loss Plans is

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