

Weighing in on Low-Carb Diets

A pound of chicken wings with blue cheese dip now tops the so-called "healthy menu" for a national restaurant chain – one sign of the low-carbohydrate diet trend that is sweeping our overweight nation. To cancer experts, a diet that helped Americans lose weight and keep it off would be welcome. Researchers have confirmed that extra body fat leads to an estimated 90,000 cancer deaths each year. But a low-carb diet can be a high-risk option when it comes to health. American Cancer Society (ACS) nutrition expert Colleen Doyle, MS, RD, warns that low-carb dieters can fall into eating habits that may increase the risk of developing cancer later in life. In short: man cannot live on steak alone.

Visions of Steak, Bacon, and Eggs

"Eating more vegetables and fruits -- or both together -- has been linked to a lower risk of lung, oral, esophageal, stomach and colon cancer," she explained. Scientists don't know which nutrients are most protective against cancer, so ACS nutrition guidelines call for eating a wide variety of colorful vegetables and fruit. In general, the more colorful the food is, the more cancer-fighting antioxidants and phytochemicals it contains. Adults should eat at least five or more servings of fruits and vegetables each day for cancer prevention. "Actually, if people really followed the low-carb diets as they're designed, they'd likely be eating more servings of vegetables than before. To the extent that people limit their consumption of refined carbohydrates such as cake, cookies, and soda, that's good," Doyle explained. But, she said, people should not limit their intake of whole grain foods, fruits, and vegetables, as some low-carb diet plans advise.

Missing Nutrients and the Problem of Saturated Fat

Nearly all grain products, fruits, and some vegetables are banned in the first few weeks of a typical low-carbohydrate diet to trigger a change in metabolism and to reduce carb cravings. Dieters are told to keep their carbohydrate intake below 20 grams a day to force the body to burn fat for energy. This can mean missing out on the important vitamins and minerals found in restricted foods like grains, fruits, milk, and yogurt – the last two being important sources of calcium. As a result, many low-carb diet plans recommend taking a multivitamin/mineral supplement with calcium.



And that raises another concern -- a concern about cancer.

"Diets high in saturated fat increase the risk of prostate and colon cancer," explained Doyle. "ACS recommends people limit their intake of saturated fat." Recently, low-carb diet programs have also addressed the saturated fat issue by putting more emphasis on healthier protein sources – chicken, turkey, and fish, for example, rather than unlimited servings of red meat.

Does a Low Carb Diet Stand the Test of Time?

"At issue is whether these diets result in longer-term maintenance of that weight loss," said Doyle. "So far there's little evidence that that is the case."

One study put both a low-carb diet and a low-fat diet to the test. Results were published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* (Vol. 348: No. 21, 2053-2166) and found people on the Atkins plan, the original low-carb diet, lost more weight, more quickly, than a comparison group of people on a standard low-fat diet. But a year later, the Atkins dieters were no lighter than the low-fat diet group.

So with 64% of Americans currently overweight, what are we to do? "If you want to lose weight, you've got to cut back total calories and exercise more," Doyle insisted. "The real key to long-term weight loss is watching portions *and* overall calorie intake. Too many people are only focusing on one aspect of the diet: avoiding carbohydrates. Counting carbs alone is not going to do it."

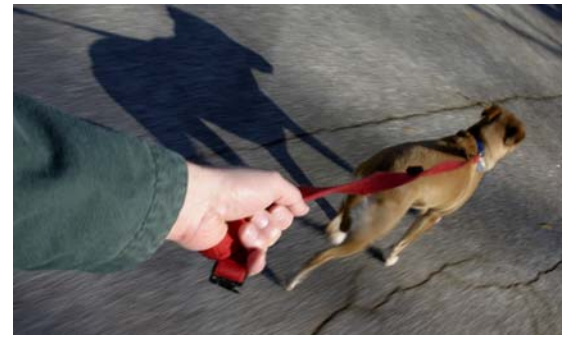
Choose protein sources that are low in saturated fats: chicken, turkey, fish and legumes instead of red meats. Eat five or more servings of colorful vegetables and fruit each day. Eat at least three servings of whole grain foods each day, such as whole wheat bread, brown rice, and whole grain cereals. Be sure half of your grain foods come from whole grain sources.

Behind the Rise in Obesity: Soda, Pizza, and 'Biggie Sized' Foods

A recent report on Americans' food intake offers clues to what dieters might do to buck the trends and lose weight instead. Over the past 30 years, the average number of calories we eat each day has surged upward—with most of the extra calories coming from refined carbohydrates. And that's the point, says Doyle. Eating a lower carb diet by cutting back on these types of carbs, rather than whole grains and fruits, is the way to go.

The Facts Behind Weight Loss

Myth:	Fact:
Skipping meals is a sure way to lose weight	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skipping meals can cause weight loss, but only in the short run. • You will eat more by sneaking snacks or eating too much during meals. • Eating up to five smaller meals during the day or three healthy meals will go a long way to healthy eating habits.
Cutting out fat will reduce my weight	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is virtually impossible to cut out all fat. • A certain amount of dietary fats are necessary to continue our brain's functions and the well being of our bodies.
Fast foods should never be a part of a diet plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Today's fast food restaurants have menus that reflect our nation's move towards healthier eating. • Most offer a variety of salads, with grilled chicken and low-fat dressing.
Eating less will allow me to lose weight	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The only way to lose weight is to burn off more calories than you take in. • It doesn't help to reduce your caloric intake if you still retain a sedentary lifestyle. • Exercise is a must.
Desserts are out of the question	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Everything in moderation • Allow yourself an occasional indulgence. • Totally deprive yourself of life's little pleasures and you may find yourself sitting in front of the refrigerator at 3 a.m., finishing off a half-gallon of double fudge ripple ice cream.



Healthy Fun For Less

Looking for an activity where you'll break a sweat but not break the bank? Here are a few suggestions:

- Sign up for a guided nature hike. Then lace up your hiking boots and get going.
- Take your dog for a walk—especially if you're both city dwellers who spend a lot of time indoors.
- Start a neighborhood softball or volleyball league. After a game, enjoy a healthy potluck dinner. Challenge everyone to bring a dish that includes fruits or vegetables.

You don't need to part with hundreds of dollars to purchase exercise equipment when items you have around your house will do the trick just as well.

- Loading and unloading your dishwasher, washing machine, or dryer, and vacuuming your carpets will help stretch and strengthen your side and back muscles. Just put a little "attitude" into your motions.
- If your house has a flight of steps, occasionally walk up and down them for no reason at all.
- Strengthen your grip and wrists by using a rolled-up pair of socks as "squeeze ball."
- Almost every garage or basement has a length of rope lying around. Put it to use as a jump rope.
- Before you down that bottle of water or sports drink, use it as a hand weight during your power walk. A can of vegetables will serve the same purpose while you talk on the phone.

What Exactly is a Portion?

It can be difficult to visualize a half-cup or three ounces, let alone one serving. Here are some everyday comparisons:

1 teaspoon of margarine	=	Tip of the thumb to the first joint
3 ounces of meat	=	A deck of cards
1 cup of pasta	=	The size of a tennis ball
1 bagel	=	The size of a hockey puck
1.5 ounces of cheese	=	The size of 3 dominoes
2 tablespoons of peanut butter	=	The size of a ping-pong ball
½ cup of vegetables	=	The size of a light bulb



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