

# Fad Diets: Fact or Fallacy?

## Introduction

Dieting seems to have become one of the most popular activities in America. More than 50 million Americans go on a diet each year. Yet, only about 5 percent manage to keep their weight off over the long run.

Americans spend \$30 billion a year on diet products, such as pills, drinks and weight loss programs. Consumers are constantly searching for the “magic diet” -- one that will help them lose weight quickly and effortlessly. But how do you know if the claims for easy results are true?

Weight-loss advice comes in literally hundreds of disguises. Most often the “new” and “revolutionary” diets are really old fad diets making an encore appearance. Examples of fad diets include those that

- tout or ban a specific food or food group,
- suggest that a food can change body chemistry, or
- blame specific hormones for weight problems.

## Objectives

Participants will learn:

- General information about fad diets.
- Specific fad diet recommendations.
- How to spot fad diets.
- How to achieve weight loss in a healthy manner.

## The Truth About Fad Diets

Every year several new diets appear - each with their own solution to weight loss. Most promise weight loss that is easy, allows for favorite foods, and does not require changes in exercise habits.

Since most consumers don't understand the science related to weight loss, they can be misled by fad diet half-truths. Few programs offer scientific support for their claims in the form of credible, published research studies. Instead, claims are based on anecdotal findings and testimonies of results. Many of these diets may also have potentially serious consequences for one's health.

## Popular Fad Diets

The popular high-protein, high fat, low carbohydrate diets recommend a high intake of fat and protein but very little or no carbohydrates. These diets are based on the idea that carbohydrates are bad, that many people are “allergic” to them or are insulin resistant, and therefore gain weight when they eat them. These high-protein, low-carbohydrate diets tend to be low in calcium, fiber, and phytochemicals (plant chemicals). Under normal conditions, the body uses glucose as its primary source of energy from carbohydrates. With little or no carbohydrates, the body converts protein to make glucose for its source of energy. This can lead to loss of lean muscle mass.

Some popular diet plans limit the diet to one particular food. This practice is extremely dangerous because it can lead to nutritional deficiencies and starvation. It can also lead to anemia, malnutrition,

decreased renal function and ultimately death. Weight loss does usually occur but sticking to the plan tends to be difficult because of the monotonous nature of the diet.

Diet pills, diuretics and laxatives are also popular methods tried by some as an effort to lose weight. These drugs are said to stimulate weight loss, with or without dieting. Losing weight by these methods may work for rapid and quick weight loss, in the form of water, but they are extremely unhealthy. They can cause dehydration, weakness, and light-headedness short term. In the long run, they can lead to nutrient deficiencies. Extended dehydration could also lead to kidney problems. This method of weight loss is unsafe and not recommended.

### The Atkins Diet

The “new” Atkins plan (which is actually a resurfacing of his book “Dr. Atkins Diet Revolution” published in the 70’s) advocates a high protein, high fat diet with a significant restriction of dietary carbohydrate. Since the Atkins regimen contradicts the overwhelming majority of research on how to healthily lose and maintain weight, most public health professionals and organizations strongly disapprove of this diet.

Many Atkins followers are outraged by the lack of support for their diet guru. Why the lack of support? Perhaps because this fad diet could be another diet failure down the road—potential reality too difficult to face yet another time. But, many do feel an attachment to Atkins and other low-carb plans because a great number truly do lose weight. Keep in mind, however, that there are many factors which must come into play if a diet can be considered truly successful *over time*. If the indicator of a successful diet is *initial* weight loss (which is mainly from muscle and water initially), and not long-term, permanent fat loss achieved in a healthy way, then it may be deemed successful. Unfortunately, this and many other fad diets will not serve your *long-term* health or your *long-term* success at weight control. Consider the following:

### Fad Diet Fallacies

If you are on the Atkins plan or are considering trying it, you may wish to take a good hard look at your dieting history first. How many diets have you tried over the years? Have you lost weight and regained it several times only to start on the next “miracle” plan? Do you honestly feel that a low carb plan is something you can stick with for the rest of your life? If not, then it’s just a temporary fix like the rest of the fads. No more chocolate cake, mashed potatoes, french fries, spaghetti, pancakes, apple pie or other favorites. Forever! Even Atkins admits that if you go back to a higher carb diet again, the pounds will return. You’ve also got history and research against you. Studies show that restrictive diets which eliminate several foods or food groups have the worst failure rates over time—a pretty dismal outlook. Unfortunately, many, caught in the initial weight loss euphoria of the low carb plan, will shun the research, hoping yet again, to beat the odds.

### No Magic in Eliminating Carbohydrates

Why do some people lose weight on this diet? Is there some magical phenomenon that occurs in the body when high carbohydrate foods are abolished? No. The Atkins diet essentially eliminates several foods and food groups like fruits, cereals, breads, grains, starches, baked goods, dairy products, starchy vegetables and sweets. This simply translates into a significant daily calorie reduction—the basis of any weight loss diet. Any reduction of calories—whether from protein, carbohydrate or fat—will result in weight loss. The basic weight loss formula is: calories burned must exceed calories consumed. Easily done when the majority of foods on a typical day’s diet are eliminated. There’s nothing *revolutionary* about this regimen.

### Healthy Populations Eat Carbohydrates

The idea that a high carb diet is responsible for obesity and illness (a concept supported by low-carb plans) is completely contradicted by many population-based studies. For instance, in Japan, carbohydrates compose the overwhelming majority of daily caloric intake. High carb foods like grains, rice and vegetables are daily staples of Japanese life, and intake of high protein, high fat animal products is minimal. In contrast to the reported “evils” of carbohydrates touted by low carb plans, Japan has one of the lowest rates of obesity, heart disease, cancer and diabetes in the world.

### Heart Disease Haven

The Atkins diet places no limit on the amount of saturated-fat-laden products one can have each day. Large portions of food like butter, red meat and bacon are advocated and encouraged. The Atkins plan contradicts numerous studies which have demonstrated the significant correlation between diets high in saturated fat and increased heart disease risk. Dean Ornish, M.D., a renowned cardiologist and author of the book Dr. Dean Ornish's Program for Reversing Heart Disease, showed an actual reversal of the heart disease process through a diet limited to only 10% of daily calories from fat. Prior to Ornish's finding, significant reversal of heart disease was only thought possible through surgery. Ornish's study participants followed a diet abundant in fruits, vegetables and whole grains, with the overwhelming majority of calories coming from carbohydrates. Dr. Atkins has not published a single study showing the long-term effects of his diet on heart health. Bottom line- heart disease is America's number one killer—if you have heart disease or a family history, stay away from low carb, high saturated fat diets.

### The Cancer Connection

According to the National Cancer Institute, five servings of fruits and vegetables each day is the minimum amount one should eat in order to help significantly reduce the risk of developing cancer. In addition, studies have shown that approximately 35% of all cancer deaths in the U.S. may be related to poor dietary habits. High consumption of whole grain products has also been linked with reduced cancer risk. Can one consume the amount of produce and whole grains necessary to significantly help prevent cancer on the Atkins diet? Impossible.

Plentiful amounts of fruits and vegetables and whole grains would constitute too many carbohydrates, and would not be allowed. If these nutritious staples contain literally thousands of compounds showing promise in preventing cancer and so many other chronic diseases, why are they off limits? Because they have too many carbs of course--those dreaded compounds which Atkins feels are solely responsible for all our health and weight worries. Bottom line—cancer is America's number two killer—be wary of low carb plans if you are interested in reducing cancer risk through diet.

### Only Food Can Provide Optimal Nutrition

Because low carb diets eliminate so many foods and food groups, getting the Recommended Daily Allowance of the nutrients the body needs on these plans is a difficult task. Conveniently, Atkins came up with his own line of expensive nutritional supplements to add to his fortune. Many are led to believe that taking supplements each day equals the same optimal nutrition we get from food, but this is incorrect. Even “supplemented” low carb diets fall short on the latest nutrition phenomenon—phytochemicals. Research has isolated literally thousands of these protective substances in fruits, vegetables, grains and legumes. Phytochemicals are showing promise in helping to prevent everything from cataracts to cancer, and hosts of other chronic

illnesses. It is as yet impossible to encapsulate these substances into a daily pill in the same optimal ratio and form that only nature can deliver. In addition, studies show that supplements fail to deliver the same disease fighting properties that whole foods do. In short, vitamins and minerals provide us with what we need to live, but phytochemicals provide us with what we need to live healthily. Sadly, falling for the mistaken notion that high carb foods are bad means missing out on daily protection from phytochemical-packed fruits, vegetables and grains. You won't find them in meats and animal products—the basis of the Atkins diet.

### Any 70's Successes?

Low carbohydrate diet regimens have been in existence for decades. Dr. Atkins published his first book back in the 70's based on the same concepts as his current book. If these plans worked in the long run, the release of new diet books wouldn't even be necessary. The followers would have actually been capable of maintaining weight loss by eliminating high carbohydrate foods for over 25 years. Their long-term weight loss success stories would have spread worldwide as the cure to obesity. However, as more and more diets appear, the weight loss industry continues to get richer and America continues to grow fatter.

### **How Can You Spot a Fad Diet?**

If you are considering a diet program, proceed with caution if it:

- Claims quick weight loss of more than 1-2 pounds per week. Quick loss generally means quick gain.
- Uses “miracle foods”. No food can reverse the effect of overeating, nor can it “melt fat away” without exercising.
- Eliminates certain foods or recommends large quantities of a food.
- Requires certain food combinations.
- Offers rigid, inflexible menus.
- Sounds too good to be true.
- Makes simplistic conclusions from a complex study.
- Bases recommendations from a single study.
- Makes dramatic statements that are proven false by reputable scientific organizations.
- Makes recommendations based on studies published without peer review.
- Recommends the purchase of a certain product to help lose weight.

### **Losing Weight the Healthy Way**

Fad diets may result in quick weight loss at first, but most of the weight that is lost is fluid. These types of diets are not sustainable because they are so limited in food choices. Usually when the dieter comes off these diets, they gain the weight back and sometimes they regain more than what was lost.

The healthiest way to lose weight is to make lifestyle changes as discussed in the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. By following these Guidelines, you can promote your health and reduce your risk for chronic diseases such as heart disease, certain cancers, diabetes, stroke and osteoporosis.

The Food Guide Pyramid is also a great tool that can be used to help make healthy food choices you can enjoy. Be sure to pay attention to the serving sizes on the Food Guide Pyramid so you eat enough food, but not too much.

Successful weight loss (losing weight and keeping it off) is accomplished by making positive lifestyle changes. This involves making realistic and step-wise goals, achieving slow weight loss, eating a healthy well-balanced diet and engaging in physical activity most days of the week.

### **Handouts**

- Handout 1: Popular Fad Diets

### **References:**

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The Atkins Diet--A Comprehensive Analysis. Kathy Goodwin, RD.

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