

## The Atkins Diet

The Atkins diet promises that not only will you lose weight -- and not be hungry -- with a low-carbohydrate diet, but you'll also be on the road to better heart health and memory function, as well as other wellness benefits.



The diet is based on the theory that overweight people eat too many carbohydrates. Our bodies burn both fat and carbohydrates for energy, but carbs are used first. By drastically reducing carbs and eating more protein and fat, our bodies naturally lose weight by burning stored body fat more efficiently.

### **How the Atkins Diet Works**

By restricting carbohydrates drastically to a mere fraction of that found in the typical American diet, the body goes into a state of ketosis, which means it burns its own fat for fuel. As a result, your body changes from a carbohydrate-burning engine into a fat-burning engine. So instead of relying on the carbohydrate-rich items you might typically consume for energy, and leaving your fat stores just where they were before, your fat stores become a primary energy source. The purported result: weight loss.

For most people, the carb consumption must be no more than 40 grams a day for this biochemical mechanism to occur. Although exercise isn't stressed, the Atkins theory holds that some people will need to add physical activity for ketosis to kick in. People are urged to supplement with vitamins, since they won't be getting them from sources such as vegetables and fruits.

The plan allows you to eat foods that many dieters have only dreamed about. The Atkins diet at a glance:

- Sets few limits on the amount of food you eat but instead severely restricts the kinds of food allowed on your plate: no refined sugar, milk, white rice, or white flour
- Allows you to eat foods traditionally regarded as "rich": meat, eggs, cheese, and more
- Claims to reduce your appetite in the process.

On the other hand, carbs are restricted (about 20 grams of net carbs per day, meaning total carbs minus fiber) in the first two weeks.

There are no exceptions to these rules during the first two weeks because low-carb consumption (no fruits and only a few leafy green vegetables) is supposed to jump-start the weight-loss biochemical activity of the diet. You're not counting calories (in fact, you may be eating more calories than you were before).

Later, the carb allowance is increased in the form of fiber-rich foods, but you do not return to eating refined sugar, milk, white rice, white bread, white potatoes or pasta made with the white flour.

The diet does allow for adding fruits, vegetables, and whole-grain foods after the two-week induction period.

Then, over time, the transition from weight loss to weight maintenance is made by gradually increasing carbs so long as gradual weight loss is maintained.

Exercise in all phases as part of a healthy lifestyle is now emphasized more than when the diet was first introduced.

### **What the Experts Say About the Atkins Diet**

Both in the U.S. and abroad, the Atkins diet remains highly controversial.

Many health experts are wary. Robert H. Eckel, MD, director of the general clinical research center at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center in Denver, says, "Our worries over the Atkins diet go way past the question of whether it is effective for losing weight or even for keeping weight off. We worry that the diet promotes heart disease. ... We have concerns over whether this is a healthy diet for preventing heart disease, stroke, and cancer. There is also potential loss of bone, and the potential for people with liver and kidney problems to have trouble with the high amounts of protein in these diets."

The American Dietetic Association also has concerns about the Atkins diet. Gail Frank, PhD, former spokeswoman for the organization and professor of nutrition at California State University in Long Beach, says, "The body needs a minimum of carbohydrates for efficient and healthy functioning -- about 150 grams daily." Below that, normal metabolic activity is disrupted.

"The brain needs glucose to function efficiently, and it takes a long time to break down fat and protein to get to the brain," says Frank. Carbohydrates, especially in the form of vegetables, grains, and fruits, are more efficiently converted to glucose. And this more efficient use of glucose has developed over a long period of time, according to Frank. "Fruits and berries are much more indicative of early man's eating pattern than eating only protein, and we haven't changed all that much physiologically."

Volumetrics author Barbara Rolls, PhD, who holds the Guthrie Chair in Nutrition at Penn State University, offers this: "No one has shown, in any studies, that anything magical is going on with Atkins other than calorie restriction. The diet is very prescriptive, very restrictive, and limits half of the foods we normally eat," she says. "In the end it's not fat, it's not protein, it's not carbs, it's calories. You can lose weight on anything that helps you to eat less, but that doesn't mean it's good for you."

### **Food for Thought**

The Atkins theories remain unproven, and most experts are concerned that a high-protein, high-fat diet can cause a host of problems, particularly for the large segment of the population that is at risk for heart disease. What's more, the plan doesn't permit a high intake of fruits and vegetables, recommended by most nutrition experts because of the numerous documented health benefits from these foods.