

The Atkins Diet



What it's about

In this diet, first popularized in the 1970's, Dr. Atkins claims that carbohydrates are the villains in the weight debate. The theory is that carbohydrates raise blood sugar levels, which in turn stimulates insulin production. Insulin, it's said, leads to weight gain by making the body store fat. This multi-phase diet is a high-fat, high-protein, low-carbohydrate plan that allows unlimited amounts of meat, cheese, eggs, poultry, fats and oils while restricting carbs.

The cautions

A few scientifically published studies do indeed show that, at least for the first three to six months, people tend to lose more initial weight on a very low-carb Atkins-style diet compared to a low-fat diet. However, after a year on the diet, the overall weight loss was about the same, demonstrating a greater weight re-gain in the low-carb dieters. Plus, this diet may be too extreme for most people to follow. A recently published study in this January's *Journal of the American Medical Association*, found that 47% of adults dropped off this diet within a year.

There's a paucity of research examining the long-term health implications of very low carbohydrate diets. A couple of years ago, researchers at Stanford University conducted the first ever systematic review of the safety and efficacy of low-carb diets (defined as 20-60 grams of carbs/day). From 1966 to February 2003, only 107 studies on low-carb diets were found. The frightening fact is that only five of these studies actually studied low-carb diets for *more than 90 days*. And, each study only involved a dozen or so people, which is not nearly enough to make recommendations for the whole population. Take note too, that none of these diet studies involved participants over the age of 53. So what does mean for the dieter who's mid-50 or older, and on the Atkins diet for more than 3 months? Honestly, we don't know. The science just isn't there.

What we do know is that the Atkins diet does have some potential health risks. Follow a strict Atkins diet, and you'll be missing out on some very wholesome, fibre-rich carbohydrates such as brown rice, whole grain bread and whole wheat pasta. Low carbohydrate diets are nutritionally inadequate in calcium, iron, dietary fibre, water-soluble vitamins like thiamin, vitamin C, folate, potassium and magnesium.

When you cut out other healthy carbs like fruits and vegetables, you're missing out on disease-fighting antioxidants, facing constipation and running the possible risk of developing neural tube defects in babies. Too much protein on your plate can boost your risk for kidney stones, osteoporosis and gout. And, unless you're loading up on plant protein from beans and tofu, chances are that you're filling your plate with fatty

meats like bacon and sausages. The last thing you want to do is drive up your saturated fat intake, which can put you at greater risk for high cholesterol levels, heart disease, and prostate and colon cancers.

Here's another red flag. Without carbs, your body starts to burn fat for fuel, which may sound like a good thing. However, the body can't burn fat completely, and substances called *ketones* are produced. Along with the bad breath that these substances produce, ketones, in the long run, may damage the “bad” LDL cholesterol, making it stick more to arteries and increasing your risk of heart disease.

The bottom line

The initial weight loss is dangerously fast and almost miraculous. But keep in mind that much of this weight loss is attributed to the water loss that occurs when carbs are released from storage. Don't be surprised if you find yourself feeling a bit dizzy and headache-y too while on the Atkins diet. Glucose, the simple sugar found in all carbohydrates, is the only fuel for the brain. Cut the carbs and you'll notice an immediate effect on your mood, attention span and energy level. You need to ask yourself if you can eat like this forever, as well as consider some of the potential long-term health risks. Cutting out all carbs is generally a bad idea. Cutting back on the portion sizes of all foods, including carbs, is a good strategy for weight loss.