

What's Wrong with Atkins?

By George Eisman, RD

The American public has embraced the Atkins Diet, and other high-protein, low-carb diets, as quick weight loss solutions. However, it is important to understand the long-term health risks associated with this type of diet. High-protein diets put the body into a state of ketosis, a metabolic state that irritates the kidneys, causes dehydration and impairs brain function. Weight loss can be achieved on a health-promoting, high-carb diet if the right carbohydrates are consumed

Why is excess protein harmful?

The liver has to work hard to deaminate (remove the ammonia from) every amino acid molecule burned for energy. Following a high-protein meal, the liver is so full of this harsh ammonia that it has to engorge itself with fluid (blood) to dilute it. Slowly, the liver converts the ammonia to urea, a less harsh substance, which is sent to the kidneys to be excreted. The kidneys, forced to work overtime to eliminate urea, assimilate calcium from the blood to attain the appropriate acid/base balance range. The blood then "steals" more calcium from the bones in an effort to raise its calcium back to normal levels.

The long-term result: Overworked liver and kidneys and calcium-depleted bones (osteoporosis), all because the body was forced to burn protein as a calorie source. Even high-protein diet advocates like Atkins and Sears admit excess protein can be harmful in the long-term. These are not diets for a lifetime, as a whole-foods, plant-based diet is.

What is ketosis?

When the body does not attain sufficient carbohydrates (at least 130 grams a day), it is forced to burn fat and protein for fuel. There are waste products called Ketone Bodies that build up in the bloodstream as a result of this abnormal situation. These ketones are very irritating to the kidneys, and the kidneys are forced to use a lot of fluid (water) to rid the body of these chemicals, one of which is acetone. This causes dehydration and sluggish brain functioning in many people, though this may be offset (temporarily) by the increased mental clarity that results from the actual fat loss that is simultaneously occurring.

Good Carbs vs. Bad Carbs

Carbohydrates may have been "created equal," but processing removes nutrients from food, leaving behind a refined carb that not only leads to health risk, but also works against weight control. Prior to the current Atkins craze, weight gain was attributed to very low-fat diets with high levels of refined carbs—an unhealthy diet that does not promote weight loss (think fat-free Twinkies, Snackwells, etc.). This type of diet releases insulin into the blood and is unsuitable for weight loss. In fact, it was the failure of this fat-free approach that led to the revival of high-protein diets. Building your meals on whole-food, unrefined carbohydrates is the healthiest way to eat, and leads to long-lasting weight control without ever having to "diet" again.

Sample substitutions:	Instead of	Use
	Sweeteners	Sweet fruits
	Bread, pasta	Whole grains
	Oils, Fats	Raw nuts, avocados, mashed fruits or vegetables
	Meats, Cheeses	Beans, raw nut butters

For more information, please visit: www.vegforlife.org.