

What's *Wrong* with the Atkins Diet?

In my practice, I've noticed a growing number of people who are dissatisfied with the Atkins diet or other low-carbohydrate clones. What are the complaints? Lack of food choices, diminishing returns when it comes to long-term weight management, and low energy levels are some of the complaints we've heard.

What went wrong with the approach Dr. Atkins referred to as a "thermodynamic miracle"? First, lack of good science. Sad to say, the Atkins plan is simply a marketing miracle rather than a scientific breakthrough. This well-oiled marketing machine was given a boost when Gary Taubes wrote an article for the New York Times Magazine called "What If It's All Been a Big Fat Lie?" in the summer of 2002. You may remember seeing the cover picture: a big slice of steak topped with butter. Since that time, Taubs has been criticized by respected researchers who were misquoted or whose interviews were omitted because they did not support his premise that consumption of too little fat or protein was responsible for the growing epidemic of obesity. Respected researchers point out that the evidence against low carbohydrate plans is crushing. In April 2001, the Journal of the American Dietetic Association (JADA) published a review of all studies identified that looked at diet nutrient composition and weight loss. In reviewing over 200, which included all "studies of popular diets in the literature", they concluded "those who ate the least fat, carried the least fat."

In December 2000, the International Journal of Obesity and Related Metabolic Disorders reviewed 16 large studies comparing over 2,000 people. The result of their meta-analysis?

You guessed it: those on low-fat diets had a "greater reduction in energy intake and a greater weight loss than the control groups." But, what about all the studies you've heard about that tout the benefits of Atkins? These short term studies with low numbers of participants have rarely been peer-reviewed or accepted by well respected journals. Since the 1970's, it has been common to find a "peppering" of studies supporting the Atkins style, but not a trend that shows scientific promise.

Second, the diet industry. Again, sad to say, but diet books, plans and pills routinely pander to people's worst impulses. Popular diet books follow Dr. Atkins classic format. It goes something like this: first, tell the readers that everything they have heard about nutrition and dieting is wrong. Second, convince the reader that all national health organizations are lying to them or are misinformed. Follow this with your own new revolutionary plan (or in the case of Atkins, dredge up an old diet from decades ago) and convince the reader that it includes all the foods they've been deprived of but now are allowed to eat to their heart's content. Do a chapter that explains how the diet works, but leave out facts about human physiology and the metabolic system that don't support your diet. Sprinkle this with several testimonials of people who have lost weight on the plan and throw in some motivational advice. Now, you've written a diet book that will sell, but is misguided.

Third, the nature of dieting. Most people think of a diet as a short-term modification of their eating habits. When food choices are limited to certain foods that are "good" and others are "bad", life gets boring. This holds true even if the good foods are steak and butter. Dieters can tolerate boredom as long as they are seeing good results on the

scale. When weight gain slows down, so does motivation to stick with the restrictive plan. The typical result? Dieters regain the weight they lost and feel frustrated. The funny thing is, dieters usually blame themselves instead of the diet. “If I only would have stuck with it” and “I’ll do it better next time” are common refrains. Truth told, the diet is at fault. High fat/low carbohydrate plans leave people tired, bored with food and searching for what really works long-term.

The Answer? Examine the habits of people who have lost weight and kept it off. The results of the National Weight Control Registry (administered by James Hill in Denver and Rena Wing at the University of Pittsburgh) show what works long-term in *real* life. For ten years, this group has tracked over 3,000 people who have lost at least 30 pounds and kept it off for a year. The average person has maintained a loss of 60 pounds for about five years. What type of diet do they follow? On average, they consume about 23 percent of calories from fat and almost nobody’s on a low-carbohydrate diet, despite the fact that the Registry is advertised on the Atkins web-page. The lessons learned from those successful with weight loss are not necessarily “diet” based. Ninety-one percent of the subjects exercise regularly, and most all of them say they do some type of monitoring of their eating and exercise, either by keeping eating and exercise logs or weighing themselves weekly.

The take home message is that diets work because caloric intake is reduced. This can be accomplished with a heart-healthy lower fat plan that includes whole grains, fruits, vegetables and lean meats or it can be accomplished with a high fat, low carbohydrate plan that will leave you drained and increase your risk of cardiovascular disease. Regular exercise and a plan for monitoring your portion sizes are the real success factors. They make more difference than deciding between the meat counter or the bread aisle at the grocery store.

Yours in health,

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