

Background

While the concept for the Atkins Diet has been around for over a century, the diet in its current form surfaced just over 30 years ago. Along with similar diets, this style of diet has become the most popular one in America over the past several years. Walk into any bookstore or nutrition shop and there is a good chance you will see a new edition of the Atkins Diet book near the front of the store. Recently, nutritionists and other health authorities have had extremely emotional debates about the diet. It seems almost absurd that a “scientific” debate could elicit so much primal

Definition of the Diet

What exactly is the Atkins Diet? To sum it up, it is a high protein, high fat, low carbohydrate and low calorie diet. Similar high protein, low carbohydrate versions of it include, the Eades, Sears, Heller, Mayo (not related to the Mayo Clinic), and Suzanne Somer’s diets. The specific regimen of the Atkins Diet includes eating as much fat and protein as you would like during the first two weeks (including eggs, bacon, beef, butter and cheese) but limiting yourself to 20 grams or less of carbohydrates a day. These carbohydrates cannot come from grains,

What is the Atkins Diet?

emotion when science is supposed to be factual, but this debate most certainly does. Those opposed to the Atkins Diet argue that it is dangerous and irresponsible, while those advocating the diet believe it is safe and effective.

Why has the Atkins Diet received so much attention? Established nutritional wisdom (USDA Guidelines) argues in favor of a diet rich in carbohydrates while the Atkins position is quite the opposite. As obesity becomes an epidemic in America, more and more people are showing skepticism towards the USDA’s current nutrition position. The Atkins diet and others like it have achieved results for many people, but are these results potentially harmful in the long run? The bottom line is that only you can decide whether the Atkins diet is an appropriate diet, and for how long.

rice, bread, fruit, milk, or starchy vegetables, but must come from specifically chosen vegetables. This is followed by general “maintenance”, which suggests an increase in carbohydrate intake to 40 to 90 grams a day.

Benefits

During the initial phase, dramatic weight loss often occurs. People who have tried and failed with many other diets find that they can lose weight on the Atkins Diet. In addition, the diet affirms the desire for many Americans to satisfy their need for highly pleasurable foods with the exception of sweets and other off limit carbohydrates. It provides hope to the so-called “carbohydrate dropouts” and Americans raised on comfort foods find positive reinforcement for many of the foods they ate growing up.

Problems

Dehydration is a significant problem for certain people on the diet. Water weight is one of the main components of the weight loss, in addition to body fat, and this dehydration can cause lack of energy, especially in individuals who don't drink plenty of water.

The Atkins Diet is known as a “ketogenic” diet, which comes from the term ketosis. Ketosis is the scientific name of what happens to the body when deprived of adequate calories. Ketosis can cause reduction of appetite, dizziness, weakness, headaches, nausea and constipation. This reduction in appetite can be beneficial for short-term weight loss, but the hazards are real. Ketosis poses several health hazards if it continues for a long time, which includes increasing the risk for kidney stones and gout. Other problems can follow from long-term adherence to the Atkins Diet. There is the possibility of increasing the LDL (bad cholesterol), which could lead to cardiovascular problems. As well, there is the problem of losing calcium, which can increase the risk of osteoporosis.



The Bottom Line on the Atkins Diet

According to leading public health experts, the Atkins Diet can be beneficial for weight loss if followed for a month or less if you drink plenty of water and take the recommended supplements. However, for the long term, there is much disagreement about whether it is safe or effective because of the diet's potentially high level of saturated fat (a known cause of heart

disease), and links with osteoporosis, gout, and Kidney stones. In the end, the decision to follow the Atkins Diet is a personal one and should only be followed once significant research has been done.

Recommendations for Healthy Living

Try to substitute whole grain products (oats, whole wheat products) in place of refined grain products and eat several servings a week of deep-water fish (tuna, salmon, etc.) and use mono/polyunsaturated vegetable oils (olive, canola). You should also continue to eat a wide variety of foods and consume at least 5 servings of fruits and vegetables a day. Participate in cardiovascular exercise (walking, jogging, cycling, swimming) four or more days a week for 30 minutes a day, balance your caloric intake with your activity level, have a yearly physical and discuss your health with your physician often. The Atkins diet and similar programs may get you motivated, but no nutritional program can compensate for lack of exercise and lack of controlling stress.

Philip Nikpour, M.S.
Health Educator

Additional information about the Atkins diet can be found at the Atkins Center's website at:

<http://www.atkinscenter.com>