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Doctor's Views

Comparing Weight Loss Diets

The "Skinny" on Popular Diet Plans

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[Weight loss](#) seems simple. A [calorie](#) is a calorie. Eat too many... gain weight. Eat fewer calories... lose weight. Not so complicated, right? Wrong, for those who believe weight loss is more than a calorie equation. Everywhere you turn there are so-called new-and-improved ways to lose weight. Americans spend *\$33 billion annually* on weight loss foods, products and services, according to the American Dietetic Association. With that amount of spending, it's no surprise there are an overwhelming number of "fad" diets and other weight-loss products on the market.

When considering a weight-loss plan, start with this proven formula: Successful weight-loss programs incorporate changes to achieve long-term healthy lifestyle behaviors, including eating practices and daily physical activity. Consult your physician and registered dietitian. They will help design a plan that is safe and meets your needs. In general, be wary of diets that offer the following:

- Fast weight loss
- A quick fix
- Claims that sound too good to be true
- Foods defined as "good" and "bad"
- Less than 1,000 calories daily
- A required vitamin/mineral supplement or food product
- Elimination of a major food group ([carbohydrates](#), [fats](#), [proteins](#))
- Lack of long-term randomized scientific studies proving the diet works and is safe. A randomized study distributes participants in a deliberately random way into either the non-tested diet group or the special diet group.

The following review examines the advantages and disadvantages of several popular diet plans. Most of the diets are based on low-carbohydrate approaches. These hotly debated low-carbohydrate diets were subject of a recent study in the "Journal of the American Medical Association" that found more research is needed on the safety and efficacy of such plans. The article analyzed hundreds of published studies about low-carbohydrate plans and found a lack of scientific evidence for or against the diets. "It is also important to note that in most of the studies contained in the analysis, weight loss occurred when study participants were on diets for longer periods, and when they ate fewer calories," according to a statement by Robert H. Eckel, a physician and chair of the American Heart Association's Nutrition, Physical Activity and Metabolism Council.

Keeping that in mind, let's look at a few popular diets, and go through some of the pros and cons, and the theory behind their potential effects.

- [The Atkins Diet](#)
- [The Carbohydrate's Addict's Diet](#)

- [The Pritikin Principle](#)
- [Protein Power Lifeplan](#)
- [Sugar Busters](#)
- [Suzanne Somers' Get Skinny on Fabulous Food](#)
- [The Zone Diet](#)

The Atkins Diet (Robert C. Atkins, M.D.)

The Diet Plan Theory:

The Atkins diet is a high-protein, high-fat, low-carbohydrate plan. The diet allows for unrestricted amounts of meat, cheese and eggs while severely restricting carbohydrates, including sugar, bread, pasta, milk, fruits and vegetables. Atkins' diet is based on the theory that eating carbohydrates creates a production of [insulin](#), a [hormone](#) secreted from the [pancreas](#), leading to increased weight gain and hunger, which is a true [physiologic](#) response. When converting to this approach, the plan holds that dieters will experience reduced appetite and their bodies will use stored [fat](#) for energy versus burning [glucose](#) from [carbohydrate](#) digestion. Burning fat for energy will supposedly lead to weight loss.

Disadvantages:

The medical community continues to debate the potential damaging effects of long-term, high-protein diets on [kidney](#) function, [cholesterol](#) levels, and possible increased risk of [heart disease](#), [osteoporosis](#) and [cancer](#). The Atkins diet restricts carbohydrates and limits the amounts of fruits, vegetables, milk and other high-fiber foods. These foods naturally provide essential vitamin and minerals to maintain health. Atkins diet followers may have difficulty maintaining this diet long term. The problem is taste. The only way to really satisfy taste without carbohydrate is by increasing fat. And this is another concern with the Atkins plan. Weight loss occurs predominately through a process called ketosis, and a majority of it (at least initially) is fluid loss. There have been no long-term randomized studies to support the safety of this diet.

Advantages:

People like eating high amounts of protein foods that are often restricted on other diets. Those who have been unsuccessful on other low-fat, high-carbohydrate diets will often lose weight with this plan. The diet is easy to follow; no point system, calorie counting or complicated meal plans are involved.

The Carbohydrate's Addict's Diet (Richard Heller, M.D. and Rachael Heller, M.D.)

The Diet Plan Theory:

The Carbohydrates Addict's diet is a low-carbohydrate eating plan. The diet recommends eating low-carbohydrate meals and one "reward meal" daily. The reward meal combines carbohydrates, protein and vegetables. It must be eaten within an hour from start to finish. The Hellers' diet is based on the theory that many [overweight](#) people are carbohydrate addicts; they suffer from a biological condition caused by a hormonal imbalance. Excess insulin is produced after eating carbohydrates, resulting in all-day food cravings and a willingness in the body to store fat. The plan holds that converting to this low-carbohydrate plan reverses such biological conditions, reducing appetite and body fat storage. The body will convert to burning fat for energy versus burning glucose from carbohydrate digestion. In general, although the finer points may differ, this can be viewed as a modified Atkins plan.

Disadvantages:

There are no long-term randomized studies to support the theory of carbohydrate addiction. Enjoying carbohydrate foods is not enough for an addiction diagnosis. Also, there are no long-term randomized studies to support the safety of this diet. Eating a low-carbohydrate diet leads to consuming larger amounts of fat and protein. Although debated by the medical community, long-term low-carbohydrate diets are believed to increase risk for [colon cancer](#) and [osteoporosis](#). High-fat and high-protein diets could cause kidney function loss, elevate cholesterol levels and increase risk of heart disease. Following this diet long term will be a challenge for many.

Advantages:

Weight loss may occur with this diet. It provides a comprehensive list of foods to consume. It encourages drinking plenty of water daily. It is less restrictive than the Atkins' diet.

The Pritikin Principle (Created by Nathan Pritikin, Revised by Robert Pritikin)

The Diet Plan Theory:

The Pritikin diet is a low-fat, high-carbohydrate eating plan. The focus is to eat vegetables, fruits and high-fiber grains. Fats should not exceed 10% of total daily calories. Nathan Pritikin's diet is based on the theory of eating low-fat, low-calorie, plant-based foods to promote weight loss and improve or prevent heart disease. The revised Pritikin diet includes a "Calorie Density Solution" - consume low-calorie dense foods (e.g. apples, brown rice) until full six to seven times daily. Eating low-calorie foods throughout the day will reduce hunger and cause weight loss.

Disadvantages:

Many medical and [nutrition](#) professionals agree with this plant-based, high-fiber approach. However, they believe 10% total daily fat intake is too low. Dietary fat provides essential [fatty acids](#) and the fat soluble [vitamins](#) A, D, E, K needed for normal cell function and tissue growth. At this fat-consumption level, it is difficult to consume all essential fatty acids naturally found in foods. This diet may not be practical for all. Those eating outside the home on a regular basis will find it difficult to maintain this low-fat diet. Low-fat diets often fail to satisfy appetite and may not be palatable for some people.

Advantages:

Weight loss may occur with this plan. It encourages eating balanced meals that include high-fiber fruits, vegetables, beans and grains. Meals are customized to meet personal needs and tastes from a wide range of foods and menus. Although debated in the medical community, there is evidence low-fat diets play a positive role in preventing heart disease and some cancers. The Pritikin diet also encourages daily exercise and stress-reduction techniques.

Protein Power Lifeplan (Michael R. Eades, MD, and Mary Dan Eades, MD)

The Diet Plan Theory:

The Protein Power Lifeplan diet is a high-protein, high-fat, low-carbohydrate eating plan. The diet allows for liberal amounts of fish, poultry, red meat, low-fat cheese, eggs and tofu. It offers a three-tiered [nutrition](#) plan designed for your level of health commitment: Hedonist, Dilettante or Purist. Daily caloric needs are determined based on protein requirements that are linked with activity levels. The Eades' Protein Power Lifeplan is based on the theory that the body is designed to metabolize and thrive on fats and proteins; there are no physical needs for carbohydrates and processed foods. The diet focuses on controlling insulin levels by decreasing carbohydrate consumption. By ingesting a low-carbohydrate diet, the body uses fat for energy versus burning glucose from carbohydrate digestion. Using fats for the body's energy source will decrease appetite and promote weight loss.

Disadvantages:

The Power Protein Lifeplan restricts carbohydrates and calories, limiting the amount of essential vitamins and minerals consumed naturally in foods to maintain health. High-fat diets are debated in the medical community. However, there is strong evidence to support increased cholesterol levels, and increased risk of heart disease, [osteoporosis](#), [cancer](#) and the potential for accelerating loss of kidney function. There are no long-term randomized studies to support the safety of this diet or to support the theory of the body's preference to metabolize proteins and fats with greater efficiency than carbohydrates.

Advantages:

Weight loss may occur with this diet. The plan encourages consuming healthier fats, low-fat cheese and avoiding fried foods.

Sugar Busters (H. Leighton and associates)

The Diet Plan Theory:

The Sugar Busters diet is a high-protein, high-fat, low-carbohydrate plan. This diet recommends reducing all refined sugars along with some high-sugar fruits and vegetables. Restricted foods include refined sugars, potatoes, corn, white rice, some breads, beets, carrots, corn syrup, molasses, honey and soda. The authors believe sugar is toxic. The plan holds that when refined sugars are eaten, blood sugar rises quickly and this causes an overabundance of insulin. The excess amount of insulin is not readily used to convert blood sugar - glucose - into energy. Instead, the body stores the glucose as fat, leading to weight gain. Eliminating refined sugars forces the body to convert fat into energy versus burning glucose from carbohydrate digestion. Appetite subsides, the body stores less fat and weight loss occurs.

Disadvantages:

The authors' scientific theories are misleading. Sugar is really not TOXIC. Pesticides are toxic. They claim lower insulin levels in the blood stream can reduce [insulin resistance](#). [Insulin resistance](#) is a medical condition diagnosed by a physician and is typically seen in [obese](#) people and Type 2 diabetics. The authors also believe you can avert [diabetes](#) with this diet. Eating sugar itself does not cause [diabetes](#) or insulin resistance in a healthy person. But, highly refined white sugar on its own does make blood sugar levels rise quicker than eating a complex sugar (such as a carbohydrate) combined with fat and protein. Being overweight is a factor in developing both insulin resistance and diabetes. Losing weight, with any diet plan, aids in preventing these conditions. The medical community continues to debate the effect long-term, high-protein diets have on accelerating the loss of kidney function, elevating cholesterol levels, increasing risk for heart disease, [osteoporosis](#) and [cancer](#). There have been no long-term randomized studies to support the safety of the Sugar Busters diet. Following this diet over the long term will be difficult.

Advantages:

Weight loss may occur with this diet. It provides clear guidelines on foods to avoid and it encourages eating high-fiber vegetables, stone-ground whole grains, lean and trimmed meats, fish, fruit and drinking alcohol in moderation. The authors recommend looking at your food portions versus traditional calorie counting.

Suzanne Somers' Get Skinny on Fabulous Food (Suzanne Somers and associates)

The Diet Plan Theory:

Somers' diet is a high-protein, high-fat, low-carbohydrate eating plan. The diet foods include unlimited amounts of meat, cheese, eggs, cream, oils and butter; and controlled portions of low-carbohydrate vegetables, whole-grain pastas, cereals, breads, beans, fruits and non-fat dairy products. There is a list of "funky foods" to eliminate, guidelines of when to eat fruits, and how to combine protein, fat, vegetables and carbohydrates. The diet is based on the theory that when eating protein and carbohydrates together, their [enzymes](#) cancel each other, halting digestion and leading to weight gain. The key to "Somersizing" is to eliminate foods high in sugars, a.k.a. carbohydrates.

Disadvantages:

There is no scientific data to support combining certain foods to lose weight or that protein and carbohydrate enzymes react when eaten together to stop digestion. Some foods naturally combine protein and carbohydrates,

including nuts, milk, beans and whole-grain breads. The body digests these foods. The medical debate over potential harmful effect of long-term, high-protein diets on kidney function, cholesterol levels, and increased risk for heart disease, osteoporosis and [cancer](#) also applies to this plan. Ms. Somers herself had a bout with [breast cancer](#). Whether this is related or not is, of course, up for speculation and discussion. There are no long-term randomized studies to support the safety of the diet.

Advantages:

Weight loss may occur with this diet. Meals are customized from a wide range of foods to meet personal tastes.

The Zone Diet (Barry Sears, Ph.D.)

The Diet Plan Theory:

The Zone diet is a high-protein, higher-fat, lower-carbohydrate eating plan. It is not as restrictive as other high-protein diets. It allows for a broad range of foods to be consumed. A small amount of protein is combined with twice the amount of "favorable" carbohydrates, including fruits and vegetables. If choosing "less desirable" carbohydrates, the portion size is smaller. Sears' Zone Diet is based on the theory that the human body is genetically programmed to reach peak efficiency when all meals, including snacks, consist of a set caloric ratio of carbohydrates, proteins and fats. The diet recommends 40% of calories from carbohydrates, 30% from protein, and 30% from fats (40-30-30). When this ratio is achieved, the body is working within the "zone." The body will have maximum energy and weight loss.

Disadvantages:

The medical and [nutrition](#) community have mixed feelings about the Zone Diet. There are no long-term randomized scientific studies to support the theory the human body is genetically designed to reach maximum efficiency with a 40-30-30 caloric ratio. The zone diet ultimately is a low-calorie diet. It is difficult to consume essential daily vitamins and minerals naturally from foods on low-calorie diets. Following the Zone Diet over the long term may be difficult.

Advantages:

Weight loss may occur with this diet. It encourages eating balanced meals that include high-fiber fruits, vegetables and beans and grains. The eating plan is easy to follow.

Summary:

While there are many more diets available, these are the ones that seem to generate the most interest and the most questions. We will not even begin to address fad diets such as the "cabbage soup diet" or the "Hollywood diet" etc. There is simply no role for the use of get-skinny-quick fads. They are nutritionally devoid, and frankly dangerous. The bottom line is just like you learned in physics way back in high school:

IN=OUT

If you take less in and put more out, you will lose weight. The key is to do it in a safe and effective manner which provides you motivation to maintain with lifestyle change, encourages adequate and appropriate nutritional intake and keeps your calories from going too low. If weight loss seems impossible and a true effort has been made to reduce caloric intake and expend more energy with exercise, there may be an underlying medical problem that needs addressing (insulin resistance, dysmetabolic syndrome, [hypothyroidism](#), and others). Just remember to consult with a physician before starting on any weight loss plan, and consider the support of a dietician for education and long term behavioral change.

For additional information, please visit our [Weight Loss Center](#).

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