The Low-Carb Low-Down
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There is no doubt that Americans are changing their views on what constitutes an optimal diet. Goodbye fat-free, sugar-laden cookies; hello grass-fed buffalo patty with extra spinach! Current research is showing some convincing evidence in terms of the true culprits of weight gain, cardiovascular problems, and diabetes that may surprise you. Although the low-carb concept may seem like a “fad,” it is actually the longest-running, most historic diet around. What’s the idea behind a lower-carbohydrate, higher-protein diet? Does this idea have substantial research backing? Are there any pitfalls? Read on to find out if a variation of this diet is right for you.

Underlying Low-Carb Idea

The main reasons behind the health benefits of lower-carbohydrate, higher-protein diets stem from choosing foods our bodies were designed to eat. Our genetic makeup is virtually identical to our hunter-gatherer ancestors, who hunted animals, caught fish, and gathered plant foods like vegetables, berries, and nuts. They consumed lesser amounts of grains, legumes, and concentrated sugars (except for the occasional honey from a beehive). Essentially, our bodies are designed to be nourished in the same way as our hunting and gathering forefathers’. Feeding our genes with these foods is what provides our body the necessary “raw materials” to function optimally. Unlike our ancestors, we have access to refined foods (i.e. white sugar and flour) and damaged fats (i.e. hydrogenated oils, fried foods, and commercially-produced oils) – foods our bodies were not made to handle. As our consumption of processed, finagled, and refined foods has gone up, so has the incidence of heart disease, cancer, obesity, diabetes, and other conditions that we are finding so common today.1,2,3

The most recent analysis of hunter-gatherer nutrition has determined that, whenever possible, hunter-gatherers consumed more animal food than plant food. The breakdown of calories from a hunter-gatherer diet ranged from 19% to 35% protein, 28% to 58% fat, and 22% to 40% unrefined carbohydrates sources. This averages out to be 35% plant and 65% animal food. Compare that with the current nutrient ratio of the average American - 15% protein, 34% fat, 49% carbohydrates (mostly from refined grains like sugar and white flour), and 3% alcohol.4 Essentially, traditional, hunter-gatherer diets are naturally “low-carb.”

Some fascinating confirmation of the health benefits of consuming traditional foods comes from the work of a dentist by the name of Weston A. Price. In the 1930’s, Dr. Price traveled the world to study the effects of the “modern” diet on dental health. He found many more benefits to traditional diets beyond healthy teeth. The differences between people who had eaten their ancestral diet from birth and people who had feasted on sugar, white flour, and soft drinks were astounding. The traditional wholesome foods produced well-spaced teeth, few to no cavities, happy demeanors, and vibrant health. Those that had switched to a more “civilized” diet suffered more narrow jaws with crowded teeth, cavities, mental dysfunction, and disease.5,6 To this day, observations of people consuming more of a “modern hunter-gatherer” diet suffer virtually no cardiovascular disease, hypertension, diabetes, cancer, or osteoporosis.7,8

Modern Misconceptions

There are two main misconceptions that have caused some confusion – the benefits of meat and the innocence of sugar and refined flour (which are essentially the same thing to the body). Many people have been led to believe that protein/meat-rich diets promote heart disease because of the saturated fat. However, recent research strongly contradicts this idea. For example, a 14-year study of more than 80,000 women by researchers at Harvard Medical School discovered that those with the highest protein intakes were 26% less likely to develop heart disease than those who ate the least.9 Furthermore, our ancestors’ high reliance upon animal-based foods did not increase their risk of heart
disease because of the quality of the protein, better ratios of fats, (i.e. lower omega-6 and more omega-3), higher intakes of antioxidants, fiber, vitamins, and phytochemicals, coupled with beneficial lifestyle habits like exercise and no smoking.  

The nutritional quality of today’s commercial meat is very different from what was consumed long ago. Most domesticated animals are drugged, caged, and fed food they are not genetically meant to eat (such as corn instead of grass), plus they lack exercise. Switching livestock from grass to grain is one of the reasons our modern diet is deficient in omega-3 fatty acids. Also, compared to grain-fed varieties, cows grazing on high-quality, fresh pasture have higher amounts of many nutrients. In fact, when cattle are raised naturally, they have similar profiles to quality game meats like buffalo and elk.

What about sugar and flour? Any carbohydrate (abundant in grains, legumes, fruits, milk, and starchy vegetables like potatoes, winter squash, peas, and corn) breaks down into sugar. A rapid increase in blood sugar, particularly from refined food sources, results in an equally fast rise in the hormone insulin. Insulin’s job is to store sugar, either in muscles for energy, or as fat storage. Most often we have plenty of quick energy calories, so you can guess where a majority of it ends up! If this elevated insulin scenario continues over a prolonged period of time, insulin resistance develops. This is when the body becomes overwhelmed by the amount of insulin and becomes sluggish in response to it. Insulin resistance is the underlying cause of weight gain, diabetes, heart disease, and it generates high levels of cell-damaging free radicals and accelerates biological aging. This can contribute to any kind of symptom, illness, or degenerative disease. In fact, research is now discovering that insulin is the key to many body dysfunctions. This does not mean people should stop eating carbohydrate-rich whole foods, like whole grains and potatoes. It is the refined varieties that cause a majority of the problems. Everyone’s ideal intake of carbohydrates is different and influenced by individual tolerance, health status, and preparation methods. For example, many cultures soak or ferment grains, which greatly enhances their digestibility. Plenty of research has shown positive effects from consuming adequate protein in lower-carb diets, such as weight loss, heart health, and slowing the aging process (oxidative stress). Think about it this way, what foods have we been eating more of over the past century? It is not meat or saturated fat consumption that has risen, but margarine and trans-fatty acids, lifeless packaged “foods,” processed vegetable oils, pasteurized/homogenized milk, commercially-raised livestock, and refined sugar. There has also been a corresponding decrease in the consumption of fresh vegetables and fruits, and an increased exposure to a growing number of environmental poisons. All these factors combined are the real culprits in weight gain and modern chronic illnesses.

Take a Practical, Whole Foods Approach

It is difficult to improve on nature. The more that is revealed about the science of nutrition, the more apparent it becomes that most problems arise when man manipulates food in some way that alters its originality – removing the fat, refining out the fiber, adding chemicals or hormones to control variables, or processing foods into fun shapes to make it more appealing. The bottom line is to focus on foods that are found in nature and emphasize clean, naturally-raised meats, wild cold-water fish, nutrient-dense vegetables, nuts, seeds, unrefined oils (i.e. extra virgin olive oil, coconut oil, organic butter), and moderate to low amounts of whole grains, legumes, and dairy products. Use whatever diet label you want - hunter-gatherer, traditional, historic, low-carb, stone-age, Paleolithic, etc; the main idea is to consume foods that our bodies were designed to handle. This type of diet will support weight loss, better memory, stronger bones, and enhanced energy, along with a reduced risk of disease.

Things can often get jumbled with the variety of diet plans being touted in the media. Although many of these resources provide useful ideas and tips (i.e. The Diet Cure by Julia Ross M.A., Dr. Atkins New Diet Revolution by Dr. Atkins, and Life without Bread by Christian Allan, Ph.D.), it is essential to remember that your wellness experience is an experimental adventure! For example, you may need
more protein under stress or during different stages of life. Ancestry can influence needs, such as with dairy tolerance. Lactose sensitivity is found more frequently in individuals of Asian, Indian, and black ethnic extraction. People from India or China may do better with more starchy foods than other cultures.28

Avoid getting caught up with pre-packed, processed “low-carb” products. Many of these foods contain artificial sweeteners, preservatives, and additives, which raise health concerns. A good question to ask when looking at any suspect ingredient is, “can this be found in nature?” If the answer is no, its use should be kept to a minimum. Moreover, processed foods, low-carb or not, should always be limited. This is not to say that the occasional treat is unacceptable, but sometimes these products can steer one off course from consuming whole, real foods loaded with disease-fighting nutrients! If sweet treats are desired, reach for one of the no-calorie, no-carb herbal sweeteners stevia or lo han. Add them into tea or make a homemade, low-carb batch of cookies.

So, what exactly is the low-carb low-down? When you think of the benefits of consuming a controlled-carbohydrate diet, remember what our foraging ancestors had to choose from - there were no Twinkie trees or bagel bushes! Even though routinely consuming a more natural and whole food based diet takes a bit more time in the kitchen and planning ahead, you and your family are worth it! The health insurance gained is priceless!

References available upon request.
Coconut Macaroons

1 cup shredded coconut, unsweetened
1/16-1/8 tsp white stevia powder concentrate
2 free-range egg whites
1/2 cup organic heavy cream
1/4 tsp vanilla extract
1/2 tsp almond extract

Mix cream with stevia and extracts. Add coconut and mix well. Let stand for 1 hour. If mixture feels dry to the touch after 1 hour, add a little more cream. Preheat oven to 350 F. Whip egg whites until peaks form. Fold into coconut. Using a teaspoon, place a small amount of coconut mix onto a well-greased cookie sheet, repeat. Bake until slightly browned (12 to 15 minutes). If tops have not browned in 15 minutes, place them under the broiler for a few minutes. Allow to cool before serving.

Low-Carb Pancakes

1 cup organic whole milk ricotta or cottage cheese
1/2 cup whey protein powder (can mix w/ rice flour)
1/4 cup flaxseed meal (ground flaxseeds)
1/2 tsp sea salt
1/2 tsp cinnamon
1/8 tsp baking powder
1/4 cup heavy cream
4 large eggs
1 Tbs extra virgin olive oil
1/4 tsp stevia liquid concentrate

Coconut oil for cooking

Combine all dry ingredients in a mixing bowl and stir. Add ricotta or cottage cheese and liquid ingredients. With an electric mixer, mix on lowest speed for about 10 seconds, then at highest speed for another minute. If the batter is too thick, add a tablespoon or two of water or cream. Heat a skillet and then add a dab of coconut oil. Pour a scoop of batter onto hot griddle to about 3 to 3 1/2 inch circles. Cook until bubbles surface on uncooked side, flip, and cook until done (about another minute). Serve hot with melted organic butter and stevia-sweetened berry sauce (see below). Note: The size of eggs and the moisture content of the ricotta or cottage cheese will affect the thickness of the batter. A “dry” cheese will require adding more cream or water to the batter.

Stevia Berry Sauce

1 package frozen berries (mixed variety works well, but use your favorite)
2 tsp kuzu (thickener) dissolved in 1/2 cup water
Squeeze of lemon
20+ drops of liquid stevia concentrate

Place berries in a pot over medium heat on the stove. Stir frequently until berries are warm and liquid appears. Add the kuzu and water mixture, lemon, and stevia. Continue to stir. Either break up the berries in the pot with a wooden spoon or transfer the sauce to a blender and mix well for a smoother sauce.
Chicken &/or Beef Satés with Dipping Sauce

16 10” skewers
1 cup heavy cream or full fat coconut milk
½ small onion, chopped
5 garlic cloves, chopped
4 tsp curry powder
1 ½ tsp ground cumin
½ tsp cayenne pepper
1½ tsp sea salt
1 free-range chicken breast (8 oz), cut into ½” strips
1 grass-fed rib-eye steak (8 oz), cut into ½” strips

Dipping Sauce:
1/3 cup natural peanut or almond butter
1/3 cup filtered water
1 garlic clove
2 Tbs fresh lime juice
2 Tbs soy sauce (or ½ tsp red chili paste instead)
4 drops liquid stevia concentrate
Dash cayenne pepper

In a blender, combine cream or coconut milk, onion, garlic, curry powder, cumin, and salt; blend until smooth. Transfer to a bowl and add chicken and beef strips; toss to coat. Cover and marinate at room temperature for 15 minutes. Make the dipping sauce: in a blender, combine ingredients and blend until smooth. Transfer to a small bowl. Heat broiler. Thread chicken and/or beef strips on skewers without crowding. Place on a oiled rack in a broiler pan and broil until cooked through, turning once, about 5 minutes. Serve with dipping sauce. Variation of recipe found in Dr. Atkins’ New Diet Revolution, 2002.

Blueberry Ice Cream

5 free-range egg yolks
½ tsp white stevia powder concentrate (to taste)
3 tsp vanilla extract
2 cups organic heavy cream, whipped
2 cups frozen organic blueberries
¼ cup filtered water

Place egg yolks, vanilla, stevia, and water in blender. Blend at medium for 30 seconds. Add blueberries and blend an additional 10 seconds. Fold yolk mixture into whipped cream. Blend lightly, until you have a marbled effect. Be sure not to break down volume of whipped cream. Freeze for 2 hours.

Shopping List

Meat
Beef - any cut
Pork
Poultry - chicken, turkey, game hen (eat skin)
Eggs - chicken, duck, goose, DHA/Omega-3 rich
Rabbit, goat
Organ meats - beef, pork, lamb; tongue, “sweetbreads”
Wild game - buffalo, elk, goose, pheasant, quail, deer

Fish and seafood
Fish - sardines, wild salmon, catfish, halibut, anchovies
Seafood - scallops, crab, lobster

Vegetables - low-carb, nutrient-dense, brightly-colored choices: broccoli, Brussel sprouts, cauliflower, sweet red and green bell peppers, chives, eggplant, spinach, chard, tomatoes, cucumbers, radishes, lettuce, cauliflower, cabbage, sunflower sprouts, artichokes, green chilies, celery, parsley, leeks, zucchini, asparagus, broccoli, green beans, snow peas, bok choy, mushrooms, garlic, collard greens, cabbage, seaweed.

High carb foods - eat small portions or according to your individual tolerance of foods like squash, potatoes, yams, corn, peas, and whole grains.

Fruits - avocados, berries (strawberries, blueberries, blackberries, cranberries, etc.), cherries, figs, lemon, lime, pineapple, pears, apples. It may be best to limit higher-carb fruits like bananas, melons, apples, etc.

Nuts and seeds - flaxseed, walnuts, almonds, brazil nuts, chestnuts, pecans, pine nuts, pumpkin seeds, sesame seeds, cashews, etc.

Oils
For cooking - extra virgin olive oil, coconut oil, butter, ghee, palm
For salad - walnut, olive, avocado, sesame, flaxseed

Beverages - filtered water, tea: green, black and all herbal

Sweeteners - herbal sweeteners stevia and lo han; higher calorie, but natural include: date sugar, honey, maple syrup