

More Diet Fads and Fantasies

Written by Jeff Novick, M.S., R.D.
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It is criminal how few health writers take the time to read — really read — and dissect newly published scientific articles. Too often, snappy headlines overrule substance. Recently, that's what happened with two new studies comparing low-carb, Atkins-style diets with conventional low-fat diets.

Both were published in the May 18 issue of the *Annals of Internal Medicine*. Both groups of authors warned that the studies had serious flaws. The first, which followed 132 obese adults at Philadelphia Veterans Affairs Medical Center, had a very high dropout rate (34 percent of the dieters) as well as “suboptimal dietary adherence of the enrolled persons.”



In the second study, funded by the Robert C. Atkins Foundation and conducted at Duke University, the 120 moderately obese dieters were followed for only 24 weeks, and the Atkins followers received nutritional supplements that the low-fat dieters did not receive, which, the authors feared, might have skewed results because the supplements have favorable effects on cholesterol and triglyceride levels and weight loss. But what we, the American public, saw in the media were headlines like “Low-Carb Is King!” and “Low-Carb Dieters Knew It All Along.”

Unbelievable. Literally. Here are the real facts, gleaned from an in-depth, sentence by sentence, graph by graph, analysis of the two articles...

After One Year, Weight Loss was Similar Between the Atkins Dieters and the Low-Fat Dieters.

True, at the six-month mark in both studies, the Atkins dieters had lost more weight, but the longer of the two studies, the one that lasted

a full year, found that the low-fat dieters had caught up and shed about the same amount of weight — 11 pounds — at year's end.

The Atkins diet, surmised lead author Dr. William Yancy of Duke University, might be harder to maintain after six months compared with the low-fat approach. In fact, most of the people on the Atkins meat- and fat-rich regimen were regaining lost weight by the end of the year while the low-fat dieters continued to lose weight for the entire first year.

LDL “Bad” Cholesterol Rose in 30 Percent of Atkins Dieters.

The Duke University study measured LDL cholesterol levels and found that after one year overall changes in LDL levels did not differ between the Atkins and low-fat dieters, but 30 percent of the Atkins dieters did experience increases of LDL levels of 10 percent or more. In fact, two of the 60 Atkins dieters who began the study dropped out because of high LDL cholesterol levels: one suffered an LDL increase of 182 to 219 in four weeks; the second dieter's LDL shot up from 184 to 283 in three months. A third Atkins participant developed chest (angina) pain and was subsequently diagnosed with coronary heart disease.

Two of the Atkins Dieters Died.

Though the Philadelphia study was small in number — just 66 men and women were on the Atkins diet — and their average age was only 53 years old, two of the Atkins dieters died, one

from hyperosmolar coma five months into the study, and the second from severe ischemic cardiomyopathy ten months into the study. No one had died on the low-fat diet.

The Atkins Dieters Suffered Far More Side Effects.

In the Duke University study, two-thirds of the Atkins dieters reported constipation problems, 60 percent reported headaches, and 25 percent complained of a general feeling of weakness. The Atkins followers were five times more likely to suffer from muscle cramps compared to the low-fat dieters, and three times more likely to have diarrhea.

The Low-Fat Diet Was Not An Optimal Low-Fat Diet, Not Even Close.

It's no surprise that the weight loss, cholesterol, and triglyceride results of the low-fat diets in these studies were disappointing. The diets themselves were the worst kind of low-fat diets.

The Philadelphia study reported data on what the subjects actually ate, and the numbers are illuminating. At the end of one year, there was no significant difference in the amount of saturated fat on the Atkins diet and the low-fat diets. (What?! And the latter was supposed to be low-fat and heart-healthy?!) Moreover, the total amount of fat on the low-fat diet (about 30 percent of calories) was at least twice as high as the amount of fat that I would recommend and four to five times higher in saturated and trans fats.

It appears, too, that the low-fat dieters in the Philadelphia study were not filling their plates with fruits and vegetables. The fiber content of their diet remained constant throughout the year, proving that their increased carbohydrate consumption came from refined carbs like sugar and refined grains.

Lots of "bad" fat? Lots of "bad" carbs? This is not a healthy low-fat diet, certainly not one that would impact favorably on weight loss, blood lipids like cholesterol, and other cardiovascular risk factors, all of which have been shown to dramatically improve on a healthy, low-fat, high-fiber diet based on whole, natural plant foods

As Long As You Are Losing Weight, Your Blood Lipids Improve.

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Atkins enthusiasts trumpeted these new studies as proving that the Atkins diet brings down triglycerides and improves cholesterol levels, but weight loss, regardless of the type of diet you're on, improves blood lipid points. Moreover, the dieters in the Atkins group took fish oil supplements, proven to lower triglyceride levels; the other dieters took no supplements. Hardly a fair comparison.

The real question is: What do your arteries look like? What happens after years of following a diet high in saturated fat? Hundreds of studies have determined that high-saturated-fat diets lead to clogged arteries and heart attacks. Dr. Atkins himself, his widow conceded in a press statement in February 2004, had blockages in his arteries, and "did have some progression of his coronary artery disease in the last three years of his life, including some new blockage of a secondary artery."

According to his death certificate, Atkins' medical history included a heart attack, high blood pressure, and a failing heart. Plus, at 258 pounds and 6 feet tall, he was morbidly obese. Not exactly an endorsement for a diet he claimed could reverse heart disease and lead to permanent weight control.

By contrast, well-designed research has found that a very low-fat diet full of whole, fiber-rich foods like fruits, vegetables, and whole grains has been shown to not only reverse coronary artery disease but also substantially diminish and even eliminate angina pain.

True, the Atkins dieters in the two new studies saw their HDL "good" levels go up, but HDL levels are a complex issue. HDL has subfractions. Some of these subfractions are made up of the protective "good" part of HDL, the part that returns excess cholesterol to your liver, where it's recognized as waste material and disposed of. But some HDL subfractions are made up of unprotective HDL. Which type did the Atkins diet raise? We don't know. But given the fact that two of the Atkins dieters died and one developed angina, I'm skeptical that the rise in HDL came from the beneficial subfractions.

Most diet and nutrition experts continue to warn Americans of the potential dangers of low-carb diets, due to concerns over decades of data linking high-fat diets to increased risk of heart disease, stroke, and many forms of cancer.

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Overwhelming research has proven which diet is best— one that's high in fiber, low in fat, and with plenty of fruits and vegetables — concluded Dr. David Katz of Yale University's Preventive Medicine Research Center in an interview with ABC News on May 17: "We have ample evidence that this basic dietary pattern prevents heart disease, cancer, diabetes, premature death, and obesity. We should be devoting all of our resources and effort to making this pattern more accessible to people."

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