

Atkins on Trial

Far from being a healthy way to lose weight, Atkins-type diets are largely based on 'pseudo-science' and can cause long term damage. Charlie Powell explains why.

An estimated three million people in the UK have tried Atkins-type diets - perhaps because they want to believe they are an easy road to weight loss. But beware - there are no long-term scientific studies to support the diet's claims and many health experts believe they are likely to damage health. In a recent survey of UK state-registered dietitians, over 97 per cent condemned the Atkins Diet, saying it gave 'bad dietary advice'.

It isn't rocket science - high protein, low carbohydrate (HPLC) diets contain higher-than-recommended amounts of cholesterol, fat, saturated fat and protein and very low levels of fibre and other important nutrients. They encourage a lifestyle that is likely to cause obesity, heart disease and other chronic diseases and directly contradict good health advice.

Atkins Diets Philosophy

Atkins-type diets consist of meat, chicken, fish, eggs and cheese with some green and salad vegetables, butter and oil. All carbohydrate-containing foods such as fruit, many vegetables, bread, cereals, rice, potatoes, pasta, biscuits and sugar are avoided.

They are designed to induce ketosis, an abnormal metabolic state that also occurs in uncontrolled diabetes and starvation, where substances called ketones are released into the bloodstream. Although this makes dieting easier because it lowers appetite, it also induces fatigue, dizziness, nausea, constipation, an unpleasant taste in the mouth and stale breath. There are even more serious long-term health implications resulting from ketosis, which may include calcium loss, increased risk of osteoporosis and a propensity to form kidney stones.

Initial weight loss can be impressive but it isn't the result of losing fat. It is largely because the body first uses up energy from carbohydrates stored as glycogen in the liver and muscles. It can also be because of increased water loss during the early stages. Both are likely to be replaced when you come off the diet. In fact, the weight loss on HPLC diets is nothing special and over a six month period work at about the same rate as other diets - an average loss of one pound per week.

Don't Blame Carbohydrates

HPLC diets cast carbohydrate as the main dietary villain even though not all carbohydrates have the same metabolic effect. It's true that many people eat too much highly-refined carbohydrate, such as sugar, white flour and white rice as these foods are absorbed quickly, causing blood sugar to rapidly peak, which in turn stimulates the pancreas to produce a large amount of insulin. Insulin lowers blood sugar but also

stimulates body cells to convert excess energy into fat.

It makes sense to reduce these carbohydrates but not by turning to high-fat, meat-based foods because they also provoke an insulin release - in the case of beef and cheese, an even bigger one than white pasta.

Diets should focus on plant-based, complex carbohydrates such as whole wheat, brown rice and fruits, vegetables, grains and legumes which are naturally high in fibre. High-fibre foods are more slowly absorbed and prevent a rapid rise in blood sugar and the resulting insulin release. They are also more filling and therefore actually help weight loss, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO).

It is a common misconception that starchy foods are fattening yet they contain less than half the calories of fat, are nutritious and are an essential part of a healthy diet. They're so important that the WHO reckons they should constitute between a half and three quarters of our total energy intake. Vegetarian diets, of course, are more likely to be rich in carbohydrates, which is one reason why vegetarians tend to be slimmer than meat eaters.

Mortgaging Your Health

There has been little scientific assessment of the long-term effects of HPLC diets but there is a welter of nutritional studies showing that animal-based diets increase the risk of degenerative diseases such as heart disease, high blood pressure and diabetes. The reasons are clear - too much fat, saturated fat, cholesterol and protein and a lack of fibre and health-protecting nutrients such as antioxidant vitamins found only in plant-based foods.

Atkins-type diets promote unhealthy eating by actually restricting how much of these important foods are

