

NUTRITION

IS THE LOW-CARB KETO DIET GOOD FOR YOU? M. Campos, MD, Harvard Health

The ketogenic diet has been used for over 100 years as a treatment option for drug-resistant epilepsy. In the late 1970s, Dr. Atkins popularized his very-low-carbohydrate diet for weight loss. Over the past two decades, a variety of fad diets have incorporated a similar approach.

KETOGENIC (KETO) DIET

Most cells prefer to use blood sugar from carbohydrates as the body's main energy source. In the absence of circulating blood sugar from food, the body breaks down stored fat into molecules of ketone bodies (a process called ketosis). Once ketosis is reached, most cells will use ketone bodies to generate energy until carbohydrates are consumed. The diet is meant to be highly individualized for the appropriate restrictions needed to produce ketones.

A ketogenic diet is high in proteins and fats and can include meats, eggs, processed meats, sausages, cheeses, fish, nuts, butter, oils, seeds, and fibrous vegetables. Because it restricts carbohydrates (typically >50% of a typical American diet) it is challenging to follow long-term.

One of the main criticisms of this diet is overconsumption of protein and poor-quality fats from processed foods, with very few fruits and vegetables. Individuals may feel tired initially, while some may have bad breath, nausea, vomiting, constipation, and sleep problems.

KETO AND HEALTH

There is strong evidence a ketogenic diet reduces seizures in children, sometimes as effectively as medication. Weight loss success on a ketogenic diet is difficult to sustain. There is good evidence of faster weight loss on a ketogenic or very low carbohydrate diet compared to participants on a more traditional low-fat diet, or even a Mediterranean diet. However, the difference in weight loss is insignificant over time and weight re-gain is common.

RESEARCH SUMMARY

While a ketogenic diet may accelerate weight loss, it is hard to follow and often heavy on red meat and processed, salty foods low in nutrients. There is limited research on the long-term effects due to the poor success rate and sustainability of the diet. Restrictions encourage a "yo-yo diet" syndrome of rapid weight loss fluctuations associated with increased mortality.

BOTTOM LINE

Avoid restrictive diets. Choose a meal pattern that is sustainable long term. A balanced, unprocessed diet, rich in colorful fruits and vegetables, lean meats, fish, whole grains, nuts, seeds, and olive oil provides the best evidence for a long, healthy, vibrant life.

