

# Low-carb Diets: Could They Possibly Be That Good?

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**What is a low-carb diet?** You may think of avoiding bread and sugar and eating only packaged food specifically marked “Low-carb.” But what does a low-carb diet mean, really?

**A working definition:** Basically, you cut out virtually all carbohydrate foods from your diet and increase your protein and fat intake. You cut out things like pasta, breads of all kinds, rice, most fruit, and some vegetables. But you eat unlimited amounts of meat, poultry, cheese, butter, and cooking oils.

**Question #1. I know lots of people, including myself, who have lost weight on low-carb diets. How do you explain that?**

In the short term, most people who go on low-carb diets do lose weight and they lose it very quickly. However, the majority of weight loss comes from loss of water and muscle tissue, not fat. Water loss is temporary, and loss of muscle tissue is not healthy.

**Question #2. I’m just tired of being fat. Is there a reason why I shouldn’t at least try a low-carb diet?**

**It might work.** If you’re trying to lose weight permanently, losing precious lean muscle tissue is like sabotaging your own body. Muscle tissue burns calories even when you are at rest. A decrease in the amount of muscle tissue you have will lead to a decrease in the number of calories you need each day to maintain your weight, making it even harder to keep your weight under control when you stop following the low-carb diet.

**Question #3. I do have some questions about the large amount of fat that seems to be a part of a low-carb diet. Is there a reason to be concerned about this?**

The American Heart Association has expressed concern that the high fat content, particularly saturated fat, increases the risk of heart disease, especially in people who follow these diets long term.

**Question #4. My low-carb diet tells me to cut out all carbohydrates at first, but to gradually re-add some. I’m beginning to wonder if this really makes sense.**

The idea behind this recommendation is to allow rapid weight loss at the beginning. However, if you are trying to lose weight permanently, why cut out low-calorie,



These foods are often restricted in a low-carb diet.

carbohydrate foods and increase high-fat foods that have more than twice as many calories? For long-term weight management, it doesn’t make sense.

**Question #5. Are there “signals” that might indicate the diet really isn’t working well?** High-protein, low-carbohydrate diets seem to work, at least in the beginning. Dieters experience an initial weight loss, but it is rarely permanent. The initial weight reduction is a result of loss of water and other body fluids. Energy (glucose) stores are depleted, which can lead to fatigue, weakness, nausea, constipation, and dehydration. Later, the decrease in weight comes from not only the loss of fat but also muscle tissue. This may affect vital body organs. Weight is usually regained quickly if the diet is stopped.

**Question #6. Why are there so many low-carb foods available? Is there any reason for not buying them?** The market will provide what consumers ask for. To a large degree, the low-carb craze is consumer driven. Grocery stores, restaurants, fast-food establishments, and even gas stations are responding to consumers’ demand for “low-carb foods” and consumers’ willingness to pay a higher price for these foods. However, it should also be noted that marketing efforts are also responsible. Americans want to lose weight and do it in an easy way. Advertisements and other marketing efforts feed into this desire.

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**Question #7. Is there a better way?** There is, but it's not easy. Weight gain results when more calories are consumed than are used. As food – especially food high in calories – becomes more and more available and people become less and less active, the nation as a whole is gaining weight at an alarming rate. The lack of physical activity plays an extremely important role in this problem, but the overconsumption of food may be even more critical. A simple answer to a complex question is to eat less and be more active.

**Question #8. Can you tell me what I should eat?** **Eating a variety of foods from the different food groups doesn't seem to work for me.** Eating a variety of foods – and not avoiding any specific group of foods – is a good start. However, we need to make smart choices within the various groups of foods. Even when you make good food choices, it's also important to consider the amount of food eaten. Excess calories (excess energy) leads to stored energy (excess weight).

*Following is a chart that may help you to make wise choices within groups of foods without eliminating any specific group. Add your favorite food to the chart.*

## Food Group Choices

	Everyday Foods	Sometimes Foods
<b>Grains</b>	Pasta, rice, whole-grain cereal, and breads	Cookies, cakes, and pastries containing large amounts of sugar and fats
<b>Fruits and Vegetables</b>	Lots of fruits and vegetables of all kinds	Fried vegetables and toppings high in fat and sugar
<b>Dairy Products</b>	Low-fat milk, low-fat cheeses, and yogurt	Whole milk and cheeses and regular ice cream
<b>Meat, Poultry, Fish, Legumes</b>	Lean, well-trimmed cuts of meat, fish, grilled or baked skinless poultry, legumes, and eggs	Fatty cuts of meat and fried fish or poultry

- Grains contain lots of fiber and are high in minerals and vitamins.
- Vegetables and fruits provide lots of needed minerals and vitamins and are high in fiber. They provide variety in color and texture and are filling, which will help you not to feel hungry. And they are low in calories.
- Low-fat milk and low-fat cheeses are excellent sources of calcium, an extremely important mineral that many people don't get enough of. They are much lower in fat than some other types of dairy foods.
- Lean meats and poultry, along with fish, legumes, and eggs, are an important part of a good diet.

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