

Muscles for brains: How fad diets can hurt you

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Everywhere we turn, we are bombarded by miracle claims of weight loss. The promises come from books, magazines, newspaper articles, radio, television and on the internet. It can be difficult to separate fact from fiction. Not only are many (most?) of these claims false, they can also be very expensive, and worst of all, dangerous to your health.

The only way fad diets succeed is in their ability to create hope, but none will truly improve health or make up for a history of poor eating. Fortunately, many of these fads are as short-lived as the benefits they promise.

There is one diet that seems to persist, despite being potentially dangerous. This is the so-called “high-protein” diet, alternately known as “low-carbohydrate.” Some of the names it has been marketed under include: the *Dr Atkins’ New Diet Revolution*, *Protein Power*, *Calories Don’t Count Diet*, *Scarsdale Diet*, and the *Zone Diet*. Whatever the name, this low or no-carbohydrate “answer” to weight problems is absolutely not a solution.

The body uses three major nutrient groups for its calories: carbohydrates, protein and fat. Eating a diet low in carbohydrates means that you get the majority of your calories (energy) from fat and protein. Unfortunately, your brain and your muscles prefer carbs for fuel. If your intake of these is low, the body begins to use proteins in its muscles to produce “food” for the brain. In other words, part of the weight loss comes from the breakdown of muscle to feed the brain. Soon, the dieter’s muscles begin to feel tired and the person feels even less inclined to exercise, definitely a step in the wrong direction.

High-protein diets tend to be high in fats and contain almost no vegetables, fruits or grains and cereals. One of the results of having so few carbs is that fat is not burned completely, leading to the formation of ketones in the bloodstream. This condition, called ketosis, is the body’s way of adapting to excessive proteins, or to fasting. Ketosis also has the effect of depressing appetite and can cause nausea, both useful for making dieting easier. On the other hand, after a few weeks, ketosis may cause kidney stones or gout (a form of arthritis) from excessive levels of uric acid. Ketosis is one of the body’s last-ditch emergency responses, and it can be fatal for someone with diabetes.

The long term risks of this kind of diet should also be cautionary: too little fibre can cause constipation and other intestinal problems; more animal protein and saturated fats increase the risk of heart disease; the chance of osteoporosis rises.

How can we know if something is just a fad diet? Some of the most telling signs include promises to lose more than 1-2 pounds a week; sounds too good to be true (but you knew that, didn’t you?); and implies that weight loss can be maintained without exercise or lifestyle change.

But what is a “good” diet? Start with the Canada Food Guide which reminds us to eat from all four food groups — grains, fruits and vegetables, milk and milk products, and meat and alternatives — and to exercise.

The notion of the “quick fix” is central to all these fad diets. The process of gaining weight is slow and gradual, and so will be losing it. Successful weight loss means developing new behaviours, and it is an ongoing process. Dropping a whole food group will not produce the results you’re looking for!

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Call-out: “The only way fad diets succeed is in their ability to create hope, but none will truly improve health or make up for a history of poor eating.”