

JOMC 50 Service Learning Research Project Dangers of the Atkins Diet

The word “carbohydrate” has practically become taboo across America, thanks to Dr. Robert Atkins and his popular low-carbohydrate, high-protein diet. The trend has become so prevalent in American culture that even fast-food restaurants have begun offering low-carb options. While the Atkins’ diet has its merits, it has hidden dangers of which many members of the public are not aware. There are several public misconceptions about the diet, such as the myth that carbohydrates are necessarily bad or that people should cut carbohydrates out of their lives altogether. Although the Atkins diet can be a short-term solution to shed pounds quickly, there is no research to show that it is safe or effective long-term (Kappagoda 725). Also, many dieters are unaware of the potential health risks caused by the diet. In order for members of the public to make informed health decisions, it is important that they know the truth about the Atkins diet before they decide to cut carbohydrates out of their nutritional regimen.

Atkins first came out with the diet that would later become a national craze in his 1970s book, *Dr. Atkins Diet Revolution*. The foundation of Atkins’ dietary approach is the concept that individuals have a carbohydrate threshold and will gain and lose weight depending on whether their carbohydrate intake is higher or lower than their carbohydrate threshold (Kidd 51). Based on this carbohydrate threshold principle, the Atkins diet consists of four phases: (1) Induction, which restricts carbohydrate intake to 20 grams per day for people who need to lose weight (2) Ongoing Weight Loss, which allows weekly

increases in carbohydrates of 5 grams until weight loss stops (3) Pre-maintenance, which makes the transition from weight loss to weight maintenance by allowing a daily increase of 10 grams each week (4) Lifetime Maintenance, which is a controlled carbohydrate lifestyle in which individuals maintain their carbohydrate threshold, which prevents weight loss or weight gain (Atkins Nutritionals). Advocates of the diet claim that it helps people lose weight, maintain their weight loss, attain good health, and prevent disease (Atkins Nutritionals). The diet works by causing a ketogenic effect, a condition that occurs in diabetes and starvation in which the body's lack of carbohydrates to bring glucose to cells causes fatty acids to form ketones that stimulate metabolic activity (Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine).

Although there has been a limited amount of research on the effects of the Atkins diet, especially the long-term effects, several studies provide important information on the effectiveness and healthiness of the diet. According to a study published in the *Journal of the American College of Cardiology*, the rate of dieters who actually remain on the Atkins diet (20% to 43%) is no higher than the attrition rates for other diets, so the Atkins diet is not necessarily easier for dieters to successfully maintain (Kappagoda 726). It also concludes that low-carbohydrate—high-protein diets cause several nutritional deficiencies that traditional diets do not (Kappagoda 728). Other research, published in the *Journal of Clinical Epidemiology*, on the comparative effects of diets on older people (over the age of 70), shows that those on high-carbohydrate, low-fat diets lived longer and healthier lives than those on low-carbohydrate, high-protein diets (Diehr 1233). Another prominent study, published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, reveals the results of a year-long randomized trial of obese men and women on either a low-

carbohydrate, high-protein or a high-carbohydrate, low-fat diets (Foster 2082). It finds that the group on the low-carbohydrate diet had greater weight loss for the first six months of the diet, but that there was no significant difference between the diet groups after one year (Foster 2088). The study also calls for more research to be done to know more about the long-term efficacy and safety of the diet (Foster 2088).

The idea of quick weight loss has caused many Americans to convert to the Atkins diet, but numerous other Americans, including many doctors, have concerns over the over the long-term efficacy and safety of the diet (Kappagoda 730). Many critics of the diet consider it merely a quick-fix diet solution that is not realistic for average dieters, who will inevitably return to eating carbohydrates and gain back the lost weight (Goodwin). Skeptics also contend that the weight lost on the diet is actually due to rapid water loss and lowered total caloric intake, rather than avoiding carbohydrates (Goodwin). Some of the more serious concerns about the diet stem from the potential health risks involved with a low-carbohydrate, high-protein diet. Some physicians think the diet is tied to increased risk of heart disease, cancer, kidney disease, osteoporosis, diabetic problems, and nutritional deficiencies (Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine). Two of the main issues that critics have are that high-protein diets are also usually high in cholesterol and saturated fats, which are bad for the heart, and that Atkins dieters do not get the vitamins from fruits and vegetables that are needed to prevent cancer (Goodwin). Also, the ketogenic process responsible for weight loss in people on the diet can cause osteoporosis, kidney stones, and loss of bone calcium in bones (Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine). The American Heart Association

openly opposes high-protein diets such as the Atkins diet (Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine).

The low-carbohydrate Atkins diet fad might be less attractive to the hoards of Americans who religiously follow it, if they only knew about the hidden dangers of the diet, such as the manifold health risks. Although many doctors have voiced their concerns about the diet, more information and awareness is needed to overcome the prevailing cultural message that carbohydrates are the dietary devil and that avoiding them altogether is the best way to lose weight. Making information about the Atkins diet and the potential health risks associated with it available on the Internet is useful because the Internet is becoming an increasingly important consumer resource for a wealth of information, including health information.

Works Cited

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