

## Cutting Away the Fat of the Atkins Diet

The Atkins diet is a craze that has swept all facets of life in the United States. Approximately 25 million Americans are currently on the low-carbohydrate diet popularized by Dr. Robert Atkins. Numerous fast food companies, led by Subway, have hopped on with Atkins in an effort to catch some of its popularity in the form of customers. Even beer companies have tried to capture a niche in the market of Atkins-obsessed, health-conscious Americans. The diet's popularity is so widespread in the United States that it is going international, capturing the attention of media outlets in countries such as England (*The Daily Beacon* 2004). There is no doubting that the Atkins diet is popular. But there are many other doubts surrounding the controversial and radical diet, making it an interesting and hot topic of study and debate. When something has this type of white-hot popularity, there are always questions as to whether this is a trend that will stick or if it is merely a fad that will go out of style. More importantly, there are questions as to whether the diet actually works or not and whether it is even safe.

The official website of the Atkins empire, [www.atkins.com](http://www.atkins.com), lists numerous success stories of people who have dedicated themselves to the high-fat, low-carbohydrate diet. Obviously, it is working for some, even if there are skeptics. The diet eschews food rich in carbohydrates like bread and pasta in favor of fatty food like beef and bacon.

Although some scientists have questioned the Atkins diet's merits, the popularity of the diet is overwhelming. The Atkins diet first gained steam by spreading by word-of-mouth. According to Kansas State marketing expert Swinder Janda, this is the best form of advertising any company can hope for (*Health and Fitness News Service* 2004). But advertising quickly moved beyond word-of-mouth to the mainstream. Outside companies quickly tried to capitalize on Atkins' popularity. Numerous fast food chains have made deals to have officially licensed Atkins-approved food on its menu. Subway, which has long advertised itself as the healthy fast food alternative, was the first to jump on the Atkins bandwagon (Horovitz 2003). Others soon followed suit. T.G.I. Friday's features and actively advertises its Atkins options on its menu ([atkins.com](http://atkins.com)). Even places where most people would expect a health-conscious person would take their business have caught on to the Atkins movement. Hardee's, of all places, is offering Atkins-friendly options (Muckian 2004). So what is Hardee's doing? Offering salads? No. Chicken sandwiches? No. They're still offering the same hamburgers loaded with all sorts of artery-clogging add-ons like chili and cheese – just no bun. Instead of wrapping the burger in two pieces of carbohydrate-loaded bread, the sandwich will be wrapped in lettuce. Burger King has followed suit. But this is the beauty – or as some people see it, the horror – of the Atkins diet. A fatty burger can help a dieter lose weight as long as the bun is nixed.

It's not just fast food that has joined the Atkins diet trend either. Beer companies are now also lining up to carry low-carb brews (Howard 2003). Again, one would not normally associate a health nut with a beer drinker, but even breweries are joining in the Atkins fun. Most beer commercials on television now stress the number of carbohydrates its product contains. Even they know there is a significant market for low-carbohydrate options – even when someone is going to the bar. Michelob has seen a jump in sales with its addition of Michelob Ultra, the low-carbohydrate version of the original Michelob (Gambling 2004). Not only are people buying the beer, they're paying more for the beer, proving that it is savvy for a business to take advantage of the Atkins diet. When beer companies and fast food chains are advertising on healthiness, then there is a sure sign that the Atkins diet movement is a significant social one.

Nonetheless, there are those that are wary of the Atkins diet and its consequences. There are scientists who might not be sure the Atkins diet is truly the miracle diet it is made out to be but are willing to concede there are lessons that can be learned from the principles imparted from the diet. However, there are also some scientists who see the Atkins diet as a significant threat and are concerned that the diet is duping people into unhealthy and even dangerous nutritional habits.

The Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine has been one of leading and most vocal critics of the Atkins diet. On its website, it has a consumer advisory devoted solely to the potential health risks of following the diet. The site also includes a registry of and testimonials from people who have followed the Atkins diet and experienced terrible side effects. The Committee is very concerned with the ramifications of the high-fat, high-protein diet that was promoted by the late Dr. Atkins. The site outlines numerous health risks associated with such a diet that also eschews carbohydrates. As the official website of the Committee states, “High-protein, very-low-carbohydrate weight-loss diets are designed to induce ketosis, an abnormal state that also occurs in uncontrolled diabetes mellitus and starvation. Over the long run, ketosis can contribute to a variety of physical problems, including calcium losses, increased risk of osteoporosis, and an increased propensity to form kidney stones (Barnard).”

The site goes on to list some even more significant, potentially life-threatening side effects. The list includes colorectal cancer and heart disease among others. There are other potential side effects that the site does not give mention to. One study has shown that a pregnant woman on the Atkins diet could be subjecting the fetus to numerous health risks. The report says that the foods that Atkins tells its followers not to eat contain folic acid and other important nutrients that are vital for neurological development. Foods such as breads, pastas and cereal, which are normally avoided by Atkins dieters, are key sources for these nutrients. Absence of these nutrients could lead to birth defects and some forms of cancer according to the study (Picard).

However, there are many scientists who are not as quick to dismiss the diet as both illegitimate and damaging. *The Harvard Health Letter* is one of those publications that does not believe the Atkins diet is a perfect solution or a miracle diet in any way. In fact, it thinks the diet is flawed in many ways. On the other hand, it is quick to laud Atkins on certain aspects. For one thing, since the diet is actually on a real program, it has legitimacy. The diet has also changed the way people have approached dieting. Even if Atkins has not nailed the solution perfectly, it has shed light on new possibilities. It shows that simply saying “no fat” is not the easy answer anymore. The people at *The Harvard Health Letter* disapprove of the Atkins’ approval of people gorging themselves on fat and protein but are ready to concede it may not be as dreadful as some make it out to be.

In fact, the Atkins diet has received some positive feedback from independent health studies. Atkins, naturally, supported its own research and found that the low-carb diet would be healthy and highly effective in helping weight loss. Other research found that the diet is not a safe way to proceed. Most scientists, however, are slow to jump to conclusions and want to see all the research once it comes in. ABC News reported that the *New England Journal of Medicine* discovered that there is not a significant weight loss difference between Atkins dieters and non-Atkins dieters. Atkins did score a slight victory when it was reported that the diet helps reduce bad kinds of cholesterol (Cohen 2003). Despite the good news for Atkins, there are many in the scientific community who still want to hear more before they are completely convinced of the diet’s effectiveness.

Much has been made of the Atkins diet craze. A significant percentage of the population has subscribed to it. Companies are trying to make money and increase business by aligning themselves with Atkins. But there are as many opinions concerning Atkins floating around as people who have been affected by it. The Atkins diet has both its staunch supporters and its avid opponents. The web holds many of these articles – some sites give a balanced account of Atkins' pros and cons, while some have an agenda that skews it one way or another. With all this out there, it can be sometime difficult to cut through the bias and find relevant information. For example, the official Atkins website has its own obvious biases – it's going to profess how wonderful the diet it is since it has a product to sell. On the other hand, there could be some scientists that, for some reason or other, have a vendetta against the Atkins diet. This account tried to borrow a little from everything – the arguments of those who wholeheartedly believe in the Atkins diet, those who believe it is a dangerous trend and those that are willing to wait and see what further research finds. It presents, in short, what each side argues and information as to where someone can find more complete arguments. Nonetheless, with so many opinions out there, it is still up to the readers to reach their own conclusions and maybe even form their own opinions that will add to the debate.

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There are a few ways that the site's relative success could be measured. A simple counter that keeps track of how many people visit the site is a start. With a link to email on the site, viewers who would like to express their opinions would be a click away from doing so. Many web sites also have guest books and forums in which readers can weigh in with their opinions and discuss the content. Another, though less likely way, would be to track how often the web site is cited in other publications. However unlikely it would be, it would show if people doing research are using it as a source and how they are using it.