

Low-carb diets safe in short term, more effective for weight loss than low-fat diets, study says

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People deciding between low-carb and low-fat diets should know the research shows a slight advantage for low-carb diets when it comes to

weight loss, according to an article published today in *The Journal of the American Osteopathic Association*.

Physicians from the Mayo Clinic in Arizona found low-carb diets (LCDs), including Atkins, South Beach and Paleo, to be safe for up to six months. Depending on the [diet](#), participants lost between two and a half to almost nine more pounds than those who followed a low fat diet.

"The best conclusion to draw is that adhering to a short-term low-carb diet appears to be safe and may be associated with weight reduction," said Dr. Heather Fields, MD, an internal medicine physician at Mayo Clinic in Arizona and lead researcher on this study.

"However, that weight loss is small and of questionable clinical significance in comparison to low-fat diets. We encourage patient to eat real food and avoid highly processed foods, especially processed meats, such as bacon, sausage, deli meats, hot dogs, and ham when following any particular diet."

Analyzing research from January 2005 to April 2016, Dr. Fields reviewed articles that addressed potential adverse effects and overall safety of LCDs. Diets that heavily restrict carbohydrates often lead to greater consumption of meats—some of which have been implicated in worsened all-cause mortality and increased cancer risk.

While available studies did not consistently address the source or quality of proteins and fats consumed in LCDs, they did show short-term efficacy in weight loss without negative effects on blood pressure, glucose, and cholesterol, compared with other diets.

However, Fields says the findings come with a caveat.

"Physicians must keep in mind that the literature is surprisingly limited,

considering the popularity of these diets and the claims of health benefits in the public press. Our review found no safety issues identified in the current literature, but patients considering LCDs should be advised there is very little data on long-term safety and efficacy."

A Limited Body of Research

Fields also notes that limitations in the previous research she reviewed made it difficult to draw broad conclusions. For example, studies did not address the type of weight lost, whether muscle, water, or fat; and studies primarily relied on dietary recall, which is highly susceptible to error.

Fields' review found even the definition of LCD to be highly variable. While all were based on carbohydrate restriction, diets allowed carbs to account for anywhere between 4% and 46% of daily calories—which convolutes the evidence.

Clinical Advice

"As an osteopathic physician, I tell patients there is no one size fits all approach for health," says Dr. Tiffany Lowe-Payne, DO, an osteopathic family physician. Factors like the patient's genetics and personal history should be considered, along with the diet programs they've tried before and, most importantly, their ability to stick to them."

Dr. Lowe-Payne acknowledges that carbohydrates are a mainstay of most people's diets and, after six months, weight loss is virtually the same as for people on a [low-fat diet](#).

However, she noted low-carb diets deliver early benefits for patients trying to lower their blood sugar levels or manage insulin resistance.

"When you think of what dieters want—and what they need to stay motivated—it is the satisfaction of results. They want to see significant weight loss and fast. For many, a low-carb lifestyle provides the answer they are looking for," Dr. Lowe-Payne explained.

More information: Heather Fields et al, Are Low-Carbohydrate Diets Safe and Effective?, *The Journal of the American Osteopathic Association* (2016). [DOI: 10.7556/jaoa.2016.154](https://doi.org/10.7556/jaoa.2016.154)

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