

Q. My friend went on a high-protein diet and lost a lot of weight and thinks I should try it. I'm not so sure eating all that meat is healthy. What's the best diet for losing weight?

A. A high-protein diet, such as the Atkins diet, has been a popular weight loss diet in recent years. This diet has created concern, however, because it is high in meat, animal products, and saturated fat. Numerous studies have shown that a high meat intake is associated with increased risk for heart disease, cancer of the digestive tract, overall mortality, and acceleration of chronic kidney disease, kidney stones, and osteoporosis.

A new study looked at a high-protein (31% of calories), low-carbohydrate, vegetarian diet that used plant proteins instead of animal products to see if it was a healthier approach to weight loss. The primary sources of protein came from gluten foods, soy (soy burgers, tofu, and soymilk), nuts, some high-fiber whole grains, fruit, and high-fiber vegetables. Fats in the diet came primarily from nuts, vegetable oils, avocado, and soy products.

The control diet was also vegetarian, but higher in carbohydrates (58% of calories), lower in protein (16% of calories), and moderate in fat (25% of calories). It used low-fat or fat-free dairy, cholesterol-free eggs, and more grains, fruits, and vegetables.

There was no difference in weight loss between the 2 groups, indicating that calorie intake is more important than protein or carbohydrate intake. Both diets lowered LDL cholesterol levels, but the diet high in plant proteins lowered LDL cholesterol levels the best (20.4% compared to 12.3% on the high-carbohydrate vegetarian diet). Blood pressure levels and triglyceride levels also were reduced more favorably in the low-carbohydrate/high-protein diet.



What does this study tell us?

1. To lose weight, eat fewer calories (and be active). It's calories that are more important than the amount of protein in the diet for weight loss.
2. If you want to follow a high-protein/low-carbohydrate eating plan, be sure most of the protein comes from plant foods (tofu, soymilk, soy burgers, gluten, nuts, and high-fiber whole grains) rather than animal products for best results in lowering LDL cholesterol, triglycerides, and coronary risk.
3. Choose healthy fats (nuts, avocado, and vegetable oils).
4. Both low-calorie diet plans were good for losing weight. Even though both diets were vegetarian, the high-plant protein and low-carbohydrate diet showed better LDL cholesterol and triglyceride improvement than the high-carbohydrate plan.
5. Eating healthy fats (avocado, nuts, and vegetable oils) are good for the heart as long as you eat them in moderate amounts that allow for good weight control.
6. Long term, a high vegetable protein diet is restrictive and would limit whole grains, fruit, and vegetable intake. So, if you follow it for weight loss, incorporate more fresh fruit, vegetables, and whole grains after achieving your weight goal. Just eat all foods in moderate amounts and stay active to maintain your new healthier weight.

DIET SUMMARY FINDINGS (both diets were vegetarian)		
Health changes	Low-carbohydrate/ high plant-protein	High-carbohydrate
Weight	Lost 9.9 lbs	Lost 9.5 lbs
LDL cholesterol (%)	Lowered by 20.4%	Lowered by 12.3%
Triglyceride levels	Lowered by 76 mg/dL	Lowered by 40 mg/dL

References:

Tuttle K and Milton J. The "Eco-Atkins" Diet: New Twist on an Old Tale. *Archives of Internal Medicine*. 2009 Jun 8; 169(11):1027.
 Jenkins D, et al. The Effect of a Plant-Based Low-Carbohydrate ("Eco-Atkins") Diet on Body Weight and Blood Lipid Concentrations in Hyperlipidemic Subjects. *Archives of Internal Medicine*. 2009 Jun 8;169(11):1046-1054.

