

HIGH PROTEIN DIETS: How safe are they?

by Glenn R. Hoey, ND

The high-protein diet a la Dr. Atkins and others has made quite a comeback lately. I find all the hoopla and controversy over this approach rather puzzling. As a matter of fact, I find most of the information on diets and dieting somewhat ridiculous. For those of you who are not familiar with the approach of an Atkins or Protein power program, let me explain them briefly.

The essence of these programs is that people eat foods made from protein and fat, i.e. meat, fish, chicken, eggs, cheese, cream, butter, etc. They maintain low carbohydrate intake instead of the traditional low fat approach. These programs explain that for many individuals carbohydrate consumption that stimulates insulin production increases the storage of fat. Carbohydrates, no matter what the original source, i.e. potato, candy, fruit, etc. eventually break down into simple sugar, which then stimulates a large surge of insulin, produced by the pancreas, to accommodate the rising levels of sugar in the blood. Insulin, being an anabolic hormone, encourages the storage of sugar in the form of fat. Hence, for many people, following a low-fat diet does not work to reduce stored body fat. But doesn't fat make you fat? And isn't fat unhealthy for you? That is the traditional view, and it would seem to make sense. But why is it not working? Are we just too lazy to do it? Or is it that when people follow a low-fat diet for a time their bodies rebel because it ceases to work anymore?

Part of the problem is how we have come to view fat. Rather than the monster we make it out to be, fat is an essential nutrient that does many things:

1. Fat is a caloric dense foods, so it supplies long-lasting stores of energy.
2. It helps to carry fat-soluble vitamins in the blood.
3. It is metabolized differently than carbohydrate, so it does not stimulate an insulin release.
4. It helps to make us feel full when we eat.
5. It is an essential building block in the formation of all cells.

But what about protein? Isn't too much supposed to be hard on your kidneys? Does it make you have gout? I hear all these comments from patients every day. Again, let us look at protein for what it provides.

1. Like fat, it is a crucial building block found in virtually every cell.
2. It creates the structural strength of the body (holds it together).
3. Supplies the backbone for the production of HDL cholesterol and brain neurotransmitters.
4. Protein helps decrease the craving for carbohydrates.

I have found that different people respond to differing amounts of protein, fat, and carbohydrate. Many people do well on an Atkins type approach. They feel better and their blood cholesterol and triglyceride levels decrease dramatically. For others, it is not as dramatic.

Does that surprise me? No. No more than people who do not respond to low-fat, low-protein, high-carbohydrate diets.

So what is the bottom line? There is merit to both sides, but I believe that diets that emphasize protein with some fat and some carbohydrate work best for most people. What is important is not to be rigid and to vary the diet to include a wide array of foods and nutrients. Good health is built on variety and moderation, not extremes.

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