

Carb Counting –A Weight Loss Strategy That Really Works

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If you are not familiar with the “Low Carb” [carbohydrate] approach to weight loss and appropriate weight maintenance, let me tell you it will go against most of what you have been taught about weight loss. Dr. Robert Aitkin's low-carb theory of weight control is diametrically opposed to the traditional low-fat approach. I like to humorously sum up the difference between the two approaches as follows: “The low-carb approach to weight control says you can eat a pound of butter every day, as long as you spread it on only one piece of whole wheat bread!” When Dr. Atkins developed his “Atkins Diet”, he broke with all the status quo assumptions about weight loss and claimed that the over-consumption of carbohydrates, not fat are what cause obesity.

I became a proponent of the low-carb approach to weight control because I have never personally seen people lose weight so successfully as when I observed a large number of my co-workers follow a low-carb diet for two months. The results were amazing, people easily lost twenty to thirty pounds within two months. I do however agree with Atkins’ critics that the Atkins diet is actually too strict and harsh, and needs more fiber when practiced long-term. However, I believe his basic idea, to significantly reduce carbs on a permanent basis, and to worry a lot less about fat intake, is the best approach to life-long

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weight control. I have observed that entrenched ideas die hard, so lots of people still focus on fat intake and ignore their carb intake. However, I was pleased to see an article in Time Magazine (The Year in Review 2014) validating the low-carb method of weight loss as more effective than the traditional low-fat approach. I will attempt in this article to give a brief overview of the low-carb approach to weight control.

The basic premise of the low carb theory for weight loss is that people are overweight because they consume more carbs than they burn. Most Americans, on a daily basis eat way more carbs than they can possibly burn off. Many people eat the amount of carbs that farmers ate decades ago, but the farmers burned those huge meals off working twelve hour days in the fields. Most Americans sit in their offices all day, then in front of the TV/computer at night, and the excess carbs are converted to fat. Basically, the typical American diet is designed for rampant obesity, which is what we have in this country.

The high-carb American diet is also the reason that Type II diabetes has increased astronomically in the last fifty years. Eating large amounts of refined, high-carb foods puts extra stress on the pancreas as it tries to regulate blood sugar levels when large amounts of refined carbs are almost instantly converted to glucose in the blood. Anybody with a genetic tendency for Type II Diabetes will develop it, if he/she eats excessive, refined carbs over a period of time. Type II Diabetes can be controlled with a low-carb diet; it will help prevent blood sugar spikes, which will greatly reduce the likelihood of a Type II Diabetic developing diabetic related

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long-term health problems such as impotence, kidney problems, eye problems, and neuropathy/loss of limbs. Eating a low carb diet can also help a Type II Diabetic remain at his/her proper body weight. Being even 10-15 pounds overweight puts a very significant strain on the already damaged pancreas of a Type II Diabetic. A low-carb diet is likewise a good choice for Type I Diabetics.¹

So let me outline more specifically how Americans are over-consuming carbs. First, let me briefly discuss how many carbs a person should consume per day. It is difficult to give a single answer because it varies depending on a person's metabolism, level of exercise and activity, and age. Some people have more active metabolisms than others and just naturally burn off more carbs per day. Everybody's metabolism slows down in the later decades of life. Intense mental activities and stress also burn more carbs, and you burn more carbs when you are awake than when you are sleeping. So people who lead stressful, jam packed, sleep deprived lives probably burn more carbs than people who live at a more mellow pace. For the sake of this discussion, I am going to throw out the number of 170 net carbs per day as a theoretical daily carb limit for an average person getting a

¹ *Though insulin injections help regulate blood sugar, they are not as effective as a fully functioning pancreas. Therefore, avoiding refined, high-carb foods can reduce blood sugar surges so that sugar does not remain in the bloodstream longer than it should, thereby decreasing the likelihood of developing diabetic related health problems.*

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reasonable amount of exercise. This 170 needs to include all meals, snacks & beverages. I know Atkins is rolling over in his grave at my suggestion of 170 carbs per day, but I actually think that many Americans probably consume 250-300 grams of carbs per day, so this 170 would be a great improvement, and it is a number a person can maintain throughout life.

So let's take a look at how most Americans rack up way more than 170/carbs per day. The absolute worst way Americans are over-consuming carbs is by drinking soft drinks. A twelve ounce soft drink is 39 carbs, which is 2/3 the carb allotment of a low carb dinner. Fruit juices are no better, and some vitamin waters have 33 carbs in them! Other high carb beverages are fancy coffee beverages like a Carmel Brule Frappuccino which is 63 carbs!

As far as food goes, a king-sized candy bar is 46 carbs, a typical piece of cake or pie is about 50 carbs, ice cream 40 carbs, and a package of Hostess Suzie-Q's, 70 carbs. Junk food snacks like potato chips are carb landmines: A small bag of potato chips is 48 carbs and Doritos are 51 carbs. Large muffins and bagels are carb intense with about 50 carbs each. Then there is a large order of fries for 67 carbs!

Sweet breakfast foods like pancakes and waffles are unbelievable: Two pancakes with syrup are 82 carbs, close to two meals worth of carbs. A large glass of orange juice has 33 carbs. Jam can rack up the carb count of toast, it has 26 carbs in two tablespoons!

Popular ethnic dinner foods are also a big problem in terms of carb count. Let me give a few examples. Mexican food is the worst. Corn is a very high-carb food, so if you start

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with nachos or corn chips and salsa you're getting a lot of carbs before you even start your actual dinner. If you have the typical soft drink or margarita with your food, you're racking up even more carbs. When you add the beans, rice, and white flour tortillas, you have eaten, in one sitting, enough carbs for an entire day, maybe even a day and a half! Italian food is another high-carb cuisine. White pasta is very high-carb and then you usually eat white flour garlic bread with it. Then top it off with a nice Italian dessert, and again you have consumed a whole days worth of carbs in one meal. Greek cuisine usually offers a bad carb combination: pita bread which is high-carb, huge portions of rice, and then rice pudding for dessert!

High-carb fruits like bananas, apples, pears, raisins etc. are about 25 carbs per typical serving. "Eat lot of fruits and vegetables" is an old adage, but fruit should actually not be lumped together with vegetables. Most vegetables are very low carb and can be eaten freely (excluding potatoes, winter squash and corn) but many fruits should be considered a treat.

Giving up all these high-carb foods or cutting way back on them may sound extreme. In reality, as Americans we have become accustomed to eating OUTRAGEOUS amounts of carbs, so that a reasonable amount sounds like severe deprivation to us. The American diet is in desperate need of a major overhaul; people need to think about the carb count of the meals they consume. Our carb intake does not match our carb burning, plain and simple. Our overall portions and our consumption of sugary foods and drinks have increased over the last

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twenty years, but our activity level has decreased. So how do we structure our eating habits to consume a reasonable amount of carbs?

Step one for getting to an appropriate daily carb intake is to eliminate soft drinks, fruit juices and other high carb beverages from your diet. Meals should consist mostly of meats/poultry, legumes, fish/seafood, dairy products, and lots of vegetables. Bread should never be consumed with meals, the typical meal already has plenty of carbs. Grains are high-carb, so when you consume grains, you need to do so in moderation and eat whole grains so you get as much protein as possible and some valuable fiber along with the carbs. A piece of whole wheat bread is less than fifteen carbs. A high protein, high fiber bread should be a central part of your low-carb diet. It's helpful to limit how many typical white bread sandwiches you eat. Better to eat open face sandwiches, with only one piece of whole grain bread. The extra fifteen carbs you save by using only one piece of bread, can be used for a nice snack later in the day. Pasta, pizza, Mexican food, or a trip to McDonalds should be a once or twice a month treat.

Snacks should be small and carefully planned to include foods high in vitamins, minerals and protein for example, nuts, or cheese and a small portion of fresh fruit, --an apple can be cut in half and not eaten in one sitting. Veggies and dip are a wonderful low-carb snack. Always pack snacks with you when you are away from home (low carb snack bars are convenient) so you are not tempted to stop at a gas station and buy something evil! Desserts

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should be a once or twice a week splurge, and you should eat a very low-carb meal before you indulge in dessert such as a steak with a salad, or a pork chop and broccoli. If you use your daily allotment of carbs wisely, you can eat three solid meals a day and two snacks and not feel hungry. If you want carb splurges, you need to earn them with a jog, or walk, or trip to the gym.

The low-carb method of weight loss/control DOES WORK. But if you want to utilize it, you have to begin COUNTING THE CARBS IN ALL OF THE MEALS YOU PLAN, AND YOUR SNACKS AND BEVERAGES. In deciding how many carbs you intend to eat per day, let the mirror and scale be your guide! They will help you judge whether you are at the weight you want to be. You should weigh yourself daily, first thing in the morning, nude, and have a little calendar by the scale to record your weight. A two pound fluctuation is nothing to worry about, but if you notice a pattern of your weight creeping up three pounds and staying at that higher weight, you need to reduce your carbs, or increase your exercise. The trick is to nip weight gain in the bud, not wait until it becomes five pounds. Five pounds takes some extended deprivation to lose, so better to not go there. However, if you are okay with being a little over weight i.e. ten pounds, that's okay, just keep it to ten, and do not let it creep up to fifteen.

If you are just a little overweight (5-7 pounds) and want to lose those extra pounds, I suggest a fairly gradual weight loss program, setting your initial daily carb goal at 120 net carbs per day (Net means you get to subtract out the grams of fiber) including all meals, snacks, and beverages.

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Then, when you get to the weight you want, increase it to 170 carbs/day. This assumes that you are getting regular substantial exercise. To lose more substantial weight, i.e. twenty or more pounds, you may want to consider a 50-70 carbs a day diet for several months so you drop the weight fairly quickly. This is not fun, you will be living on mostly lean meat and salads, and one piece of high-fiber bread as your only carb, but it will do the trick. Most people trying to lose a significant amount of weight get discouraged if they do not drop weight quickly. Once you get to the weight you desire, you can go on the 170 carbs per day maintenance regime. All these numbers are theoretical, let your scale guide you as to how many carbs you can consume per day without gaining weight. Or if you want carb splurges, exercise more.

When you are attempting to lose weight, you must refrain from going on binges and un-doing your weight loss by a week of eating outrageous amounts of carbs. If you find yourself getting frustrated with your carb deprivation, allow yourself a few carefully planned splurges. Or up your daily carb allotment and be willing to take longer to achieve your ideal weight. The important thing is to make a decision to become a carb counter for the rest of your life, and to become someone who, in general, consciously tries to eat the amount of carbs he/she burns. When you eat in restaurants, most of the time you should be bringing some of your meal home, because restaurant portions are usually way more than anybody should be eating in one meal. Also don't be afraid to refuse things that are free; just because the "Breakfast Special"

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comes with hash browns and toast, you don't need to eat them both.

In summary, Americans are not making their dietary choices based on nutritional value or rational facts. Most Americans make food choices out of addiction, addiction to refined carbs and sugar. If we want to stop having rampant obesity in this country, including lots of obese children, this has to change. Hopefully, now that you have some familiarity with the carb content of foods, you will think twice before you eat a king-sized candy bar or bag of potato chips because you will know you would be eating in that one "splurge" almost a whole meal's allotment of carbs, and it is just not worth it. Likewise, with using up your whole days allotment of snack carbs by drinking one soft drink. If you'd like to get started on a carb counting weight loss plan, please download the User Friendly Carb Counting Chart.