

## The Atkins Diet – Safe for the Long Term?

Although it didn't become a worldwide phenomenon until it was heavily marketed in the late 1990s, the widely known Atkins diet was actually introduced back in 1972. The brainchild of Dr. Robert C. Atkins, a renowned cardiologist from Ohio, the revolutionary (and highly controversial) diet is based on a drastic decrease in carbohydrates paired with high levels of protein and fat.

### How it Works

The premise behind the diet seemed simple enough. The body relies primarily on carbohydrates as its fuel source, so when fewer grams of carbs are consumed, the body uses stored fat instead. This results in a higher amount of calories burned. The diet also helps the body to maintain stable insulin levels, which can help to curb hunger and reduce cravings.

### Benefits & Drawbacks

In addition to trimmer waistlines, Atkins and his supporters heralded even more benefits of the diet, including better heart health, increased memory retention, disease prevention, and sharper mental focus.

For medical professionals, though, the diet was tougher to digest; they questioned the viability of an eating plan that allowed virtually unlimited amounts of bacon, eggs, cheese, meat, and cream-based soups and dressings, while strictly limiting the intake of bread, grains, pasta, and fruit. Some physicians were concerned that the high amounts of saturated fat could cause kidney problems, bone weakness, digestive difficulty, and high cholesterol levels.

### How Long is Safe?

Following the release of several highly publicized books by Dr. Atkins, millions of people who had struggled with weight problems for years became instant devotees of the diet, delighted as the pounds fell away quicker than they'd ever imagined. But as an undercurrent to all the excitement, a persistent question lingered: "How long should you stay on the Atkins diet?" Many wondered if they would compromise their health or suffer any long-term effects if they continued to ingest a low-carb, high-fat, high-protein diet for months, years, or even a lifetime.

According to Atkins and his advocates, the diet really can be incorporated as a long-term lifestyle—if it's implemented as recommended. The Atkins diet is broken up into four phases, designed to guide dieters into a reasonable, healthy lifestyle change:

- **Stage 1 (Induction):** This is the phase that usually gets the most press, as it's the most restrictive stage. When you first start out on Atkins, you're encouraged to consume very little to no carbohydrates, with 20 grams as the daily maximum. The types of carbs are limited, too: your daily intake should consist of non-starch veggies and greens. The most drastic and immediate weight loss is usually seen during this phase.
- **Stage 2 (Ongoing Weight Loss):** When you reach this stage, you're permitted to slowly increase your carbohydrate consumption to 25 grams per day. For each consecutive week thereafter, you can allow yourself an additional 5 grams. When you get to the point where the weight loss levels out, deduct 5 grams of carbs to determine your fixed number to maintain your current weight.
- **Stage 3 (Pre-Maintenance):** Once you've reached your targeted weight loss goal, you can slowly increase your carbohydrate intake by 10 grams each week. If you see any weight gain, that's a cue to cut back a few grams.
- **Stage 4 (Lifetime Maintenance):** When you've reached your goal weight and the Atkins diet has become an integrated part of your daily lifestyle, it's safe to begin branching out to other forms of carbohydrates, while still limiting the total amount of grams consumed each day.

### Tips for Long-Term Atkins Dieters

In spite of numerous studies, there are still sharply conflicting views on whether the Atkins diet is 100% safe for long-term application. For those who intend to incorporate the plan as a permanent lifestyle choice, medical professionals recommend following these tips to reduce the chances of potential health risks:

- Snack on small meals throughout the day. When you consume smaller portions every four or five hours, you'll keep hunger at bay and will be less likely to overeat.
- Drink plenty of water. Hydration is a key element in maintaining an active metabolism and digestive health. Doctors recommend approximately 24 ounces per day.
- Restrict the caffeine. High-protein diets can cause dehydration and constipation; since caffeine is a diuretic, it should be limited when reducing your carb intake.
- When planning your low-carb menu, opt for lean meats and protein sources. Wise choices include skinless chicken, turkey breast, ground sirloin, grilled or broiled fish, tofu, and egg whites.

Most importantly, talk with your doctor or a registered dietician before starting a low-carb diet. They'll be able to recommend a custom-tailored eating plan that takes into account your personal preferences and pre-existing health conditions.

**Resources Used:**

<http://www.webmd.com/diet/atkins-diet-what-it-is>

[http://www.bupa.co.uk/health\\_information/html/health\\_news/300503diet.html](http://www.bupa.co.uk/health_information/html/health_news/300503diet.html)

[http://lowcarbdiets.about.com/od/atkinsdiet/Atkins\\_Diet\\_Information.htm](http://lowcarbdiets.about.com/od/atkinsdiet/Atkins_Diet_Information.htm)

<http://www.thedietchannel.com/Safe-Guidelines-for-a-Low-Carb-Diet.htm>