

# Did Atkins Tell a

# BIG FAT LIE?

“Most overweight people do not overeat,” claims Dr Robert Atkins in his phenomenally huge bestseller Dr Atkins’ New Diet Revolution. “Wouldn’t you rather be on a diet that sets no limit on the amount of food you can eat,” he says, adding later, “It’s so perfectly adapted to use as a lifetime diet, that unlike most diets, the lost weight won’t come back on.”

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Followers of the book, and the diet, say that what makes Dr Atkins so credible is his ability to cite scientific studies to support a low-carbohydrate way of life. The New Diet Revolution is, indeed, littered with these so-called facts. “It has been proven that it takes off more fat than other diets on which you would be eating an equal number of calories,” is one of many of the doctor’s claims.

But what do avid followers really know about the Atkins Diet, other than what Dr Atkins has told them? Have they seen a complete nutritional analysis of the diet’s make up? Is it really as good a tool for weight loss as the doctor claims? And what potential risks to the body does the Atkins Diet pose? These are all questions nutritionists, like myself, have been exploring in light of the media frenzy surrounding the controversial diet. Now we have the facts at our fingertips, Dr Atkins may well be stirring in his grave.

## The Atkins Diet – the Facts

The Atkins Diet is less than 20% carbohydrate, 25-30% protein and a whopping 55-65% fat (see Table 1). People often mistakenly call the diet a high-protein diet, when actually the figures show that it is a very high-fat, low-carbohydrate diet in which the protein intakes are no different to what people in Western society usually eats.

The Atkins Diet has been critically analysed by Dr Janet King, Marjorie Freedman and Eileen Kennedy in the highly prestigious journal Obesity Research (2001). Unfortunately, however, the media never picked up on their phenomenal research paper, Popular Diets: A Scientific Review. This medical paper, for the first time, gave people a full dietary analysis of the Atkins Diet by comparing it to the Recommended Dietary Intakes of vitamins, nutrients, minerals and energy.

A close inspection of the 14-day Atkins ‘induction’ phase reveals an energy intake of only 1152 calories or 4838 kJ. This figure is extremely close to what health authorities consider to be a very low-calorie diet, or semi-starvation diet, of 800 calories or 3360kJ a day. What this means is that, during the induction phase, Atkins’ dieters are eating less than half the number of calories that average men and women in Western society consume on a normal day. Another alarming fact is that this phase is also overloaded with saturated fat, fat, cholesterol, and vitamin B12, while it is too low in fibre, vitamin E, iron, magnesium, calcium, thiamin, and carbohydrate.

## Weight loss during the ‘induction’ phase

Not surprisingly, therefore, people do lose weight in the induction phase. However, there is a big difference between losing scale weight and fat weight; weight loss does not mean fat loss. But how does Atkins explain it? He lies and calls it fat loss!

Here are the facts. Carbohydrates are stored as glycogen. 400 grams can be housed in muscle cells and 70 grams can be housed in liver cells. Each gram of stored glycogen is bound to 3-4 grams of water. During the first 24-48 hours of a carbohydrate-free diet, these glycogen stores are depleted, along with plenty of water. Hence, during the first few days or even the first week of the induction phase, the body can lose 3-4 kilograms, simply from stored carbohydrate and water depletion. This is extremely similar to the weight loss of a football player who has finished a gruelling game. A player will weigh 3-4 kilograms less after a game due to water loss and glycogen depletion. The claim of massive fat loss during this time is Atkins’ first lie!

## The ‘ongoing’ and ‘maintenance’ phases

The Atkins Diet is typical of most low-carbohydrate diets in that it is deficient in the following valuable nutrients: fibre, vitamin E, iron, magnesium and folate, and excessive in the following: fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, vitamin A, phosphorus, sodium and potassium. Anyone who has been on the Atkins Diet, or any other low-carbohydrate diet, can put their lethargy down to the deficiency in these essential nutrients.

## Cancer risks

In his book, Atkins states that the diet “is so perfectly adapted to use as a lifetime diet”. This is a seriously misleading comment because, to any medical expert, a diet that contains only 8% to 37% of the daily recommended fibre intakes is a huge concern, especially if those low levels are maintained for a lifetime. Eating 3 grams of fibre during the induction phase and 8 grams of fibre during the ongoing phase is poor dietary advice, as most reputable institutions recommend 30-35 grams per day. A low-fibre diet is extremely low in fruit and vegetables, too. In a recent issue of the prestigious American Journal of Clinical Nutrition 1995, it was shown that a diet lacking in fruit and vegetables increases the risk of cancer to the colon, breast, pancreas, lung, stomach, oesophagus and

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bladder. In a more recent issue of the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition 2002, Frank Hu reiterated that new evidence indicates that a high consumption of plant-based foods, such as fruit and vegetables, nuts, and whole grains, is associated with a significantly lower risk of coronary artery disease and stroke. Low fibre consumption is not a lifestyle diet.

## Fat and saturated fat – the facts

As Table 1 shows, fat intakes (75 grams per day up to 114 grams per day) on the Atkins Diet are high, and animal fat intakes are dangerously high (29 grams per day up to 49grams per day). The low-fat message heralded by scientists some years ago still carries huge weight in terms of health. Atkins mocks the low-fat message in his book by saying: “ ‘Lose weight, stay on a low-fat diet’, has been repeated so often, most of us assume it is scientifically proved. But as you will learn in this book, science proves something quite the opposite.”

Atkins cites Harvard epidemiologist Walter Willet’s study Is Dietary fat a major determinant of body fat? to back his theory. I interviewed Walter Willet late last year and, from the feedback I received, it appears that Atkins may have misinterpreted the study. Said Willet: “I do think that some aspects of the diet can be beneficial to some people, however, high intakes of butter, sausage and red meat is not an overall healthy diet.” The whole premise of the ‘low-fat message’ was not to eat a diet low in fat and replace the fat with sugar, nor was it to eat as much as you like or triple the consumption of low-fat products. The message was to reduce your fat intake, especially animal fat, and eat more fruit, vegetables, whole-