

FINDING YOUR NICHE

by Diana Kelly Levey

Whether you're training for a race, have a specific health concern or just want to lose your belly fat, you can tailor a low-carb plan to best suit your individual needs

A low-carb diet is not a one-size-fits-all plan. If you are living with diabetes or prediabetes, you may have very different objectives than someone whose goal is to complete a marathon, or even someone who is just looking to drop a few extra pounds.

"You're reducing carbs, but what exactly are you replacing them with?" asks Visanti Malik, Ph.D., a research scientist in the department of nutrition at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. "You can up the protein and fat, but people need to focus on what specifically you're replacing carbs in your diet with. What you're substituting those carbs with will have an important impact on your health."

Here, experts chime in on how to tweak your low-carb lifestyle in order to best match your health, fitness or lifestyle goals.

IF YOU WANT TO... Lose Weight

Recommended Diet
Atkins, South Beach or Keto

When you want to get lean and show off a sleek physique, a low-carb diet is a great solution, says Linda M. Stephens, M.S., a nutritionist and trainer who coaches male and female bodybuilders to get them ready for the competition stage. She advises sticking with a plan that has you eating between 50 to 150 grams of carbs a day. "That's still lower than what most people are consuming when they start a [weight-loss plan]," she says.

That doesn't mean shunning all carbs: When Stephens writes up a nutrition program for her clients, she tries to incorporate clean-burning carbs to keep them fueled

Being overweight carries numerous health risks, from diabetes to dementia.


More than 70 percent of Americans today are considered overweight or obese.

LOSE WEIGHT!



Pick Your Plan

throughout the day, rather than avoiding all carbs entirely. That might be a half-cup of white or brown rice, 4 ounces of potatoes or a slice of whole-grain bread. "This little bit of carbs, maybe not at every meal, is enough to help the person feel satisfied, while keeping their metabolism burning enough that they're still going into fat-burning mode."

In addition, Stephens advises

KETO DIETERS LOSE A LARGE AMOUNT OF WATER WEIGHT AT THE START.

those who are looking to shed excess pounds to limit their carb consumption to the daytime hours, when we tend to be more active. (It will also limit the total number of calories you consume over the course of a full day.) In the evening hours, stick with primarily lean protein and fat.

However, if you have a special event and want to fast-track your results further, consider a more keto-focused diet that reduces carb intake to 20 to 50 grams a day. "By keeping carb intake this low you'll produce even less insulin and draw on your fat stores more quickly," she says. Plus, you'll experience an almost immediate loss of water weight as you use up the glycogen stores in your body. Going very low carb also gets your metabolic fire burning and forces your body to use fat for fuel. If you don't have a lot of weight to lose (more than 10-20 pounds) you don't need to go to this extreme, adds



A pound of muscle tissue burns three times as many calories as a pound of body fat.

BUILD MUSCLE!

Muscles need at least 24 hours between workouts to recover.

Stephens. "The problem on a leaner person is you can start to break down muscle tissue, which can be counterproductive," she notes.

IF YOU WANT TO... Build Muscle

Recommended Diet
Paleo or Carb Cycling

Why focus on adding lean muscle? For one thing, having more muscle mass will boost metabolism, so you'll burn more calories even at rest. Research shows muscle mass contributes to about 20 percent of the body's metabolism (compared to 5 percent that comes from fat) and can help you burn an extra 50 calories a day. Not to mention, of course, the aesthetic changes associated with adding muscle—flatter abs, sleeker arms and shoulders, sculpted legs—which means you look strong and fit even if the numbers on the scale don't shift as much as you would like.

Of course, to build muscle, you need to do regular strength training. But that's not the only thing that's important. "In order to have the energy to do that kind of exercise, you need foods like grains, fruits and vegetables—they provide the carbohydrates that give your muscles the energy they need to get through your workouts," explains Nancy Clark, M.S., R.D., author of *Nancy Clark's Sports Nutrition Guidebook*.

Your body breaks these higher-carb foods into glucose, which is stored in the muscles and liver as glycogen. "When you go into the gym to lift, you've got the glycogen stores to power through your workout. But if you don't have enough, it's going to be very hard to build muscle," adds Stephens.

That's why diets that are relatively higher in complex carbs

(such as paleo), or that allow you to have more carbohydrates on the days you train (like carb cycling), might be a better option for you than very-low-carb diets like keto. Without adequate glucose stores, adds Stephens, your body may start to break down that muscle rather than work to build it. Stephens recommends a diet that's about 40 percent carbs for women and 50-60 percent carbs for men for those who are trying to increase lean muscle mass. Once you've achieved a base of lean muscle, she adds, you can carb cycle, with a combination of lower-carb (20 to 50 grams) non-training days alternating with higher-carb days (50 to 150 grams) when you are working out hard.

IF YOU ARE... Diabetic or Prediabetic

Recommended Diet
Keto or Slow Carb

The research on this is starting to side with a lower-carb approach to eating. In fact, some diet experts are now saying that keto may be one of the best programs for someone already living with diabetes or who might be in the prediabetic stages. "Being on a low-carb diet can reduce blood sugar levels even without taking into account potential weight loss," says Spencer Nadolsky, D.O., a board-certified family and obesity physician with RP Health and author of *The Fat Loss Prescription* and *The Natural Way to Beat Diabetes*. Research shows that subjects with type 2 diabetes who follow a ketogenic diet had both improved insulin function and weight loss compared to those on traditional calorie-restricted diets. "With a very-low-carb diet like keto, there isn't as much glucose in the blood, and so it becomes easier

GAIN ENDURANCE!



It can take a few weeks or longer to adapt to diet changes.

to manage and to improve insulin sensitivity," adds Nadolsky.

A study presented last year at the American Diabetes Association's Scientific Sessions found subjects who followed a very-low-carbohydrate diet (between 20 and 70 grams of carbs per day) lowered their medication use by more than twice the level compared to those who were on a high-carb diet. Note: Anyone who has diabetes or prediabetes and is contemplating trying a very-low-carb diet like keto should talk to their health-care practitioner first to avoid hypoglycemia (too-low blood sugar) and to help manage any medications while on the program.

IF YOU HAVE... Cardiovascular Disease or Elevated Risk Factors

Recommended Diet
Lower-carb Mediterranean

Although research has been mixed about the benefits of very-low-carb diets and heart disease, most experts agree that cutting back on refined carbs in favor of a low-to-moderate-carbohydrate menu can attack many of the risk factors associated with cardiovascular disease, including elevated levels of cholesterol and triglycerides. "Much of the damage done in heart disease isn't caused by eating too much fat, it's from an excess of carbs and sugar," says Ken Berry, M.D., author of *Lies My Doctor Told Me*.

A 2014 study published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* looked at 148 men and women without cardiovascular disease or diabetes. They found that after one year those who followed a lower-carb diet (less than 40 net grams per day) not only lost an average of 8 pounds more than those on a

low-fat diet (less than 30 percent of calories from fat), they also had more significant improvements in HDL ("good") cholesterol and triglyceride levels.

Because of mixed data about saturated fats and heart disease as well as the need for adequate fiber, it makes sense to follow a moderate low-carb diet like a modified Mediterranean plan, says Nadolsky, keeping daily carbs at about 40 percent of your diet. "That type of plan will make sure you are getting healthy fats like nuts and olive oils." You'll also get enough quality carbs—fruits, vegetables, grains and beans—to promote a healthy microbiome, which reduces the risk of heart disease, diabetes and cancer, adds Clark. Just talk to your health-care practitioner to make sure this way of eating makes the most sense for you.

IF YOU WANT TO... Train for an Endurance Event

Recommended Diet
Keto

Traditionally endurance athletes like marathoners have relied on a high-carb diet to reach their performance goals, but increasingly keto-adapted athletes are using this low-carb approach and having success with it. Although research on endurance athletes on keto is new and often involves small sample sizes, athletes that have followed keto for months have trained their bodies to tap into using fat for fuel. One study from Ohio State University found ultra-endurance runners who slashed carbs to 10 percent of their diet burned 2.3 times more fat than those who got half their calories from carbohydrates.

"No one really understands how

long it takes to fat-adapt," says Jennifer Giamo, C.P.T., owner of Trainers in Transit. "That's kind of the missing piece." How long that adaptation period takes can be different for everyone, but once you're there, you can rely on your fat stores for energy during endurance training, she says. "You're not getting those highs and lows you experience when you consume carbs and have glucose

ENDURANCE ATHLETES
LEARN TO FAT-ADAPT FOR
A STEADY FUEL SOURCE.

fluctuations," Giamo adds. "If you're eating high carb, you're burning through those carbs and when you hit the 'wall' during an event, it's because those carbs are depleted." On the other hand, on keto or a similar low-carb diet, you have a constant supply of fat and your body runs on that.

However, keto isn't equal for all activities. One small study published in the *Journal of Sports Medicine and Physical Fitness* found that a short-term, low-carbohydrate diet like keto can hurt performance in exercises that are dependent on anaerobic systems, like short-burst, high-energy activities—including HIIT, sprinting or weight lifting. If you plan to try keto, start it at least a few months before training for an endurance event like a half marathon, marathon or triathlon. It may also make sense to work with a sports nutritionist to ensure you're fueling your body properly before and after workouts.