

## **The Atkins Diet may be Neither Revolutionary nor Healthy**

What name comes to mind when the subject of diet comes up in any conversation? I'll bet for most of you it's Atkins. Who hasn't heard of the Atkins diet? And if you're overweight, chances are pretty good that you've tried it, like millions of people worldwide. Dr. John Atkins is a practicing physician whose first book about weight loss was published in 1972, "Dr. Atkin's Diet Revolution." It has since sold more than 10 million copies and is on the NY Times list of top 50 selling books of all time. Since then Dr. Atkins has authored or co-authored more than 30 books, established the Atkins Center in New York City, published a newsletter and magazine, and achieved status as one of the most well-known alternative/complementary medicine figures of all time, not to mention his popularity as a speaker and talk-show guest. What exactly is this "revolutionary" concept in weight loss? It is based primarily on one principle, which is basic metabolism science: when the body is deprived of carbohydrates it burns fat, and later protein, for energy. This in turn results in the production of "ketones" which are metabolic breakdown products of fat. When these ketones are excreted in the urine they take water with them, increasing water loss and thus resulting in fairly rapid weight loss. The Atkins diet simply recommends carbohydrate restriction and liberal amounts of protein and fat. The original formula of no more than 20 grams of carbohydrate per day and unlimited amounts of meat, fish, eggs and some cheeses has been amended over the years to include diet stages of differing ratios of carbohydrates, fat and protein, and to include supplements. The basic message is still the same: low carbohydrate diet results in weight loss. Does the diet work? Absolutely. Almost everyone will lose weight if they severely limit carbohydrates, even if they aren't overweight. Much of the weight loss is "water weight" as mentioned, but there is another less exotic explanation for the success of the Atkins diet. What food items do we most commonly eat that are nutritionally unnecessary and cause unwanted weight gain? I'm going to guess that carbonated beverages, chips, beer, baked goods, espresso drinks, and candy are the winners. What do they all have in common? Carbohydrates make up the bulk of their calories. Are they allowed on the Atkins diet? You can guess the answer. Dr. Atkins and his many disciples also claim that a high protein diet and production of ketones causes appetite suppression. However, a well done study done in 1985 showed that this was not in fact the case. They also claim that the Atkins diet "burns fat." There has never been any scientific data to support this theory. Are there any adverse effects of the Atkins diet? In a healthy individual and for a short period of time probably not any serious ones. Fatigue caused by the ketosis, constipation caused by the water loss and dehydration, and dizziness caused by both are usually minor and go away when the diet is stopped or modified. More serious problems can develop if the diet is continued for longer periods. Calcium loss from bones and kidney stones may be a long-term risk. Substituting fats for carbohydrates may elevate cholesterol and increase risk for heart attack and stroke. Diabetics may risk kidney damage from high protein diets. Vitamins and essential nutrients may be deficient in a low carbohydrate diet that does not include fruits and root vegetables. Why am I fascinated by the multi-million-dollar Atkins empire? Because it isn't based on very much science and it's not revolutionary. It's so simple that my mom had it figured out years ago: don't eat junk food. Maybe she should have written a book.