The Pros and Cons of Popular Diets for Diabetics

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The Dangers of Diabetes Fad Diets

Fad diets promise quick weight loss, and lots of them deliver on that promise (if you can stick it out for the duration). The problem lies in the way the weight is lost – severely cutting calories or eliminating certain ingredients will interfere with your metabolism, and while that may help you shed a few pounds, it will probably leave you feeling pretty crummy overall.

More importantly, a drastic diet can significantly hinder your diabetes management and even lead to weight gain and heart disease in the long run.

Fad Diet Dangers

Healthy people will eventually feel the uncomfortable effects of an extreme diet – hunger, mood swings, and dehydration – but diabetics can suffer a far worse fate. When you live with a metabolic disorder like diabetes, an unhealthy diet can lead to:

- **A dangerous drop in blood sugar**. Most diabetics are familiar with the effects of low blood sugar levels since it's relatively easy to bring about – even one low-calorie meal can significantly lower your blood glucose levels. A string of low-calories meals can compound the problem, and if you take medication to keep your blood sugar down, restricting your calories can jeopardize all your body's natural processes.
- **Increase in cholesterol and blood pressure**. Although plenty of studies have found that low-carb diets can lower cholesterol, blood pressure, and body weight, the effects are short-lived. Most of the pounds you shed are water weight, and any long-term decrease in cholesterol would be attributed to weight loss, not the specific nutritional composition of your special menu. In fact, a diet higher in fat or protein is more likely to cause cardiovascular problems down the road.
- **Increased risk of kidney failure**. Diabetes is the most common cause of kidney disease, but most patients do not experience kidney failure. However, certain low-carb, high-protein diets (the Atkins, Zone, and Sugar Busters diets, for example) stress the kidneys, affecting their ability to function, which will speed up the progression of kidney disease.

Types of Fad Diets to Avoid

New diets hit the market all the time, but many are simply old fads that have been rebranded as new solutions. In fact, most fad diets can fit easily into a few general categories:

- **Low calorie**. The Cabbage Soup Diet is perhaps the oldest surviving low-calorie diet plan, with its big, tempting weight loss claims. The foundation is pretty simple – take in a small amount of calories at every meal for an extended period of time. But a swift and severe calorie reduction can shock your system, and any diet that prescribes one meal (or in some cases, one ingredient) for several days or weeks is sure to result in a nutritional deficit. In the end, these plans can trigger weight loss, but they are absolutely

unsustainable for good health.

- **Low carb**. Reducing carbohydrates isn't necessarily a bad plan – most people eat too many simple carbs, and there's no doubt that these refined foods contribute to metabolic syndrome. However, any diet that pushes fat and protein while restricting *all* carbs is never a good idea, since complex carbs (whole grains, vegetables, and fruit) are loaded with nutrients and minerals that your body needs. The South Beach Diet is one example where carb-cutting could be helpful: as long as diabetics skip the first phase meant to trigger ketosis, they can benefit from the reduction in simple carbohydrates and unhealthy fats that the plan prescribes.

Next page: more fad diets to avoid, and creating a safe diet

Types of Fad Diets to Avoid (continued)

- **High protein**. In many cases, low carb goes hand-in-hand with high protein; if you cut out one of the three major nutritional compounds (carbohydrates, fats, and proteins), you'll naturally take in more of the other two. The major problem with high protein diets like the Atkins is that they rely on ketosis, a process that forces your kidneys into overdrive to deal with all the extra protein, which that can quickly spiral into kidney disease or failure if a condition like diabetes puts you at risk.
- **Restricted ingredients**. Plans such as the Blood Type Diet, the pH Diet and Glycemic Index diets may seem like a custom fit for your body, but they generally lack evidence to support their claims, and they can be extremely difficult to follow. Not only will you have to stick to a very specific ingredient list, but you must keep your insulin and blood sugar requirements in mind at every step of the way, which is a lot of information to juggle.

In certain cases, a diet promoting extreme weight loss can be a good idea. Obese patients who are suffering from many weight-related complications may be able to hasten their improvement with an all-liquid meal replacement diet or something similar, as long as they are closely monitored by a doctor. However, most doctors would advise against such a plan, and the diet won't teach you what you need to know for long-term weight maintenance – namely, healthy eating habits.

How to Build a Good Diet for Diabetes

Losing weight can be a crucial part of diabetes management, but keeping the weight off is just as important. In order to stay at a healthy weight, you need a diet you can stick to forever, which means it must include tasty, wholesome foods that reach across the entire nutritional spectrum.

There are a few approaches that deserve a place in every diet for diabetes management:

- **Portion control**. One of the best ways to reduce your calorie intake and lose weight without harming your body is by eating a range of wholesome foods in smaller portions. This is the idea behind plans like Weight Watchers and SlimFast, and that means they could be useful to kick-start healthier eating habits. However, if you do try out a low-calorie plan, measure your carbs closely (too few in one sitting can be a problem), and adjust your insulin and medications to allow for several smaller meals during the day (rather than three big meals). Remember, shakes and supplements may help at first, but they're not a long-term solution.

- **Approval from the experts**. Before you sign on to any diet, be sure it gets the thumbs-up from major health advisors, like the Surgeon General and American Dietetic Association. Visit websites like diabetes.org and heart.org to compare the diet's ingredients and eating guidelines with what the medical experts recommend for good diabetes control and heart health. Do the lists match? If you see glaring differences, do your body a favor and pass on the prefabricated diet plan.
- **Focus on health, not weight loss**. Many diabetics will need to lose weight in order to gain control over their disease, but focusing all of your energy on dropping pounds can make the goal harder to attain. Instead, get into the habit of eating smaller portions of fresh foods that are filling and nutritious, and using

sauces and cooking oils sparingly. Weight loss is a natural side effect of a nutritious diet based on whole, unprocessed foods.

If you need a solid plan to get on track, work with your doctor to build a structured menu and meal schedule instead of using a pre-packaged fad diet. Be sure to keep the emphasis on balance – denying yourself particular food groups, or favoring one sort of ingredient too heavily will probably result in frustration and low energy levels, and will work against your good intentions.