

Mount Hope Monitor

Health Column

YOUR HEALTH MATTERS

Carbohydrates - Are They Good or Bad? (JANUARY 2009)

Every day we see, read and hear through different media about some type of “diet.” It would probably be no exaggeration to say that there are hundreds of diets from which to choose. If you do a little research on Internet, you will be amazed to find a variety of diets. Chances are that you have never heard of some of them before. They can be categorized by diseases, specific foods, food groups, popular diets, and e-diets etc. When you see that enormous list, you wonder - what really works? Each diet has a different advice that can be drastically different from another. What they have in common is the claim that this diet “works” along with assurances that you will lose certain number of pounds in a short time frame.

These claims are especially true for the no-carb or low-carb diets. The theory behind low-carb or no-carb diet such as South Beach and Atkins is that if dieters avoid foods containing carbohydrate - that is, starches or sugars - they will shed pounds. These diets dramatically restrict the intake of fruit, fruit juice, starchy vegetables, beans, bread, rice, cereals, pasta and other grain products, in favor of foods that are high in fat and protein: meat, cheese, and non-starchy vegetables. As the diet proceeds, the carbohydrate restriction somewhat relaxes, but fatty, high-protein foods continue to dominate the dieter’s plate. The media reports publicize the short term dramatic weight loss but ignore the potential risks of such diets.

The American Heart Association, American Dietetic Association, and the American Kidney Fund have all published statements warning about the various dangers associated with no-carb/low-carb, high-fat and high protein diet. The Nutrition Committee of the Council on Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Metabolism of the American Heart Association states: “High-protein diets are not recommended because they restrict healthful foods that provide essential nutrients and do not provide the variety of foods needed to adequately meet nutritional needs. Individuals who follow these diets are therefore at risk for compromised vitamin and mineral intake, as well as potential cardiac, renal, bone, and liver abnormalities overall.”

Here are some tips on adding “good” carbohydrates to your diet:

Start the day with whole grains. If you’re partial to hot cereals, try old-fashioned or steel-cut oats. If you’re a cold cereal person, look for one that lists whole wheat, whole oats, or other whole grain first on the ingredient list.

Use whole grain breads for lunch or snacks. Check the label to make sure that whole wheat or another whole grain is the first ingredient listed.

Bag the potatoes. Instead, try brown rice or even “newer” grains like bulgur, wheat berries, millet, or hulled barley with your dinner.

Pick up some whole wheat pasta. If the whole grain products are too chewy for you, look for those that are made with half whole-wheat flour and half white flour.

Bring on the beans. Beans are an excellent source of slowly digested carbohydrates as well as a great source of protein.

Regardless of what you have seen, read or heard about the dangers of carbohydrates, they are an important part of a healthy diet - your body needs them. It is true that easily digested carbohydrates from white bread, white rice, and other highly processed foods may contribute to weight gain and interfere with weight loss, but that does not mean all carbohydrates are “bad.” Carbohydrates provide the body with the fuel it needs for physical activity and proper organ function. The best sources of carbohydrates - fruits, vegetables, and whole grains deliver essential vitamins, minerals and fiber.

“Your Health Matters” is a regular column in the [Mount Hope Monitor](#) by Morris Heights Health Center (MHHC) staff. MHHC serves more than 48,000 residents annually and provides a wide range of primary, specialty, dental, mental health, educational and social services at 13 convenient locations. For more information, call (718) 716-4400 or visit www.mhhc.org. We hope to see you soon!