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Commissioner William Bratton

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A Look At Low-Carb Diets

By Matt Brzycki, Assistant Director of Campus Recreation, Fitness, Princeton University

I'm a hoarder. It's not so bad that I'll end up with my own reality show but I tend to hold onto things that almost anyone else would discard. This includes spare parts for equipment that I no longer own, phone bills from more than 20 years ago and tax returns that date back to 1978 (when my annual salary as a Sergeant in the US Marine Corps was \$6,981.72).

Recently I decided to show my inner demons who's boss by throwing out old issues of some fitness magazines that I had accumulated in my home office. I thumbed through the publications to see if there were any articles worth snipping and hoarding ... er, uh, I mean keeping. Perhaps my most interesting find was an article in an issue of the *ACSM's Health & Fitness Journal*. The article was called "Low-Carbohydrate Diets for Weight Loss Are Back: Do They Work Any Better This Time?" The publication date was September 1999.

Fast forward several years. Those of us who are old enough to remember gas prices that were less than two bucks a gallon probably recall the low-carb craze that began around the middle of 2003. And when I say "craze," I mean just that. To attract the growing number of consumers who shunned carbs, many restaurants suddenly—and sometimes comically—offered low-carb meals. (One of Burger King's low-carb options was simply a burger minus the bun.) And manufacturers hurriedly flooded supermarkets and drugstores with low-carb products (which quickly fell out of favor). The short-lived movement peaked in the early part of 2004.

So why bring up low-carb diets now, eight years later? Well, low-carb diets—like most other diets—have cyclical popularity, meaning that they're all the rage for a brief time and then fade away only to resurface again at some point in the future. So, low-carb diets never really disappear entirely. In fact, low-carb diets have been in the public eye dating back to at least the late 1960s. Since then, the popularity of low-carb diets has come and gone numerous times with the most recent examples resurrected in 1999 and again in 2003 as noted above.

An oft-used argument for the low-carb diet is that this is what our ancestors ate thousands of years ago. Well, using this logic, I suppose that we should also hunt for our dinner with spears and live in caves since this is what our ancestors did thousands of years ago.

Are low-carb diets effective for weight loss? Yep. However, it's not because the diets are low in carbs. Rather, it's because the diets are low in *calories*. You can lose weight on a diet that consists entirely of potato chips if the number of calories that you consume is less than the number of calories that you need to maintain your weight. Obviously, though, a potato chip diet wouldn't be a healthy choice.

Are low-carb diets associated with any problems? Yep. If you decrease your intake of carbs, by default you must increase your intake of fat and protein. And consuming a high amount of fat and protein is associated with a greater risk of heart disease.

Wait, there's more. If you decrease your intake of carbs, there's no doubt that it will have a negative impact on your stamina and endurance. In particular, active individuals need to consume carbs to fuel their lifestyles. Why? Well, the primary function of carbs is to supply energy, especially during intense exertion. Fat and protein have major limitations as sources of energy. Fat is an inefficient fuel so it's preferred during low-intensity efforts when there's no need to be efficient; protein is generally a last resort since it resides in the muscles and if you're in a situation where you must depend on it as an energy source, then you're literally cannibalizing yourself.

Here's something else to consider: Anyone who tells you not to eat carbs might as well tell you not to eat fruits and vegetables since these foods contain a large percentage of carbs. And if you don't eat fruits and vegetables, you'll miss out on plenty of highly valuable nutrients. This, of course, may lead to vitamin and mineral deficiencies.

One good thing did come from the last low-carb craze: it brought greater awareness to the fact that there are different types of carbs. For instance, an apple is 100% carbohydrate ... but so is a can of non-diet soda. Therefore, choose your carbs carefully.

Bottom line: If you want to lose weight, cut back on calories, not carbs.

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