

Is the **Ketogenic Diet** Healthy? Not All Fats Are Created Equal, Experts Warn

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- **The ketogenic diet is a high fat, low-carbohydrate diet that has shown promise in treating diabetes and several other chronic diseases.**
- **Studies also indicate that weight loss results are significantly better than what can be achieved through traditional low-fat diets.**
- **The ketogenic diet is generally considered safe, even for cardiac health, as long as you choose the right type of fats.**



With an increasing number of celebrities and athletes endorsing it, the ketogenic diet — or “keto” diet for the initiated — has been generating a substantial amount of buzz in recent months, and with good reason.

Firstly, it’s quite different from the common dietary recommendations we’ve become accustomed to. For years we’ve been told to avoid fat because it leads to clogged arteries and heart disease. Yet the ketogenic diet includes an abundance of fat, making up at least 70 percent of the diet’s composition.

Claims that it may be beneficial in the treatment of diabetes, epilepsy and even cancer have also spurred interest among researchers.

This raises questions about the ketogenic diet’s safety, and its effectiveness at treating chronic illnesses.

To set the record straight from the get-go, **Miami-based cardiologist Dr. Adam Splaver** assures that there is little evidence suggesting it can be damaging to your health. However, there is a right way to follow the ketogenic diet, and a wrong way that could put you at greater risk of heart disease.

Here’s what you need to know before jumping on the “fat adaptive” bandwagon.

What is the ketogenic diet?

“The high fat, low-carbohydrate ketogenic diet was originally designed as a dietary alternative for seizure control in epileptic patients,” says **Suzanne Fisher, a Registered Dietician from South Florida.**

In fact, its effectiveness as a treatment option for children with hard to control epilepsy has long been established, with its first uses for that purpose dating back to almost 100 years ago.

In more recent years, keto has frequently been in the media and social spotlight, although not for its merits as an epilepsy treatment. Instead, it's the lure of rapid fat loss that has turned it into the latest diet trend.

"The theory behind a ketogenic diet is that the body changes how it processes energy," says **Fisher**. "Switching preferred fuel to fat as opposed to carbohydrates enables the body to tap into stored fat, accelerating the weight loss process."

Traditionally a ketogenic diet has been based on a fat to protein/carbohydrate ratio of 3:1 for infants, and 4:1 for children, adolescents and adults. For adults, this equates to approximately 70 percent fat, 15 percent protein and 15 percent carbohydrates.

The highlight of ketogenic diets is to restrict daily carbs to somewhere between 20 and 50 grams, though it's often on the lower side. And the predominant source of carbohydrate selected should be an array of non-starchy vegetables. Since protein can kick the body back to using carbs as fuel, moderate protein is recommended. While fat intake and calories are often unrestricted.

How effective is the ketogenic diet for weight loss?

Following a ketogenic diet switches the body into fat loss very fast, producing a 10 pound weight loss in as little as 2 weeks in many. These initial weight loss results are often the consequence of losing water, as the diet has a diuretic effect.

However, with maintenance of the diet plan, insulin secretion reduces (the fat storage hormone) and the body begins to tap into fat deposits, drawing on body fat as fuel and leading to greater weight loss. Unlike a low fat calorie-restricted diet which slows down metabolism, a keto diet shows no decline on metabolic rate, keeping the body's metabolism highly operational. Therefore, compared to a low fat diet, you really can expect to lose weight easier and in higher percentages.

In fact, over a period of 8 weeks, a ketogenic diet has been shown to produce weight loss of 9.7 percent, while a low fat diet produces just 2.1 percent. Plus, an added benefit is that the fat being burned in greater quantities is visceral fat, or in other words, the belly fat that can be hard to get rid of.

Still, **Dr. Splaver** shines some words of doubt on the diet, saying, "while ketogenic diets are good at accomplishing weight loss, for many people, sustainability is the biggest challenge. Many people have difficulty avoiding simple carbs like pasta, rice, potatoes and alcohol for long periods of time."

However, for those who are able to maintain the dietary changes, research shows that over the long term (12 months or more), the ketogenic diet still stands out as the clear winner over a traditional low fat diet for weight loss.

Can the ketogenic diet help other health conditions?

The ketogenic diet has shown promise:

- In helping people with type 2 diabetes reduce blood sugar and hemoglobin A1c and reduce levels of insulin resistance.
- Results from animal studies show it may be effective as an adjunct therapy in treating cancer.
- Keto has been shown to be a potential treatment against neurological conditions such as Parkinson's and Alzheimer's, as well as neuromuscular conditions like amyotrophic lateral sclerosis.
- Researchers are also beginning to explore how the ketogenic diet may impact sleep quality and duration, thyroid health, and cognition.

Is it really safe to eat all that fat?

Given that a ketogenic diet is comprised of at least 70 percent fat, you may be wondering if all that fat is safe to eat.

Dr. Splaver, a cardiologist, advises that, “the premise that high protein/high fat diets are bad for you is completely wrong. It all stems from an erroneous study called the Seven Countries Study, performed by Ancel Keys, a Minnesota physiologist. In that study, he correlated a high fat diet with a higher risk of cardiovascular disease. However, the study itself included more than 30 countries and Dr. Keys cherry-picked the data to fit his premise.”

In fact, the scientific data was so skewed that **Dr. Splaver** says it’s actually the complete opposite that correlates with a higher risk of cardiovascular disease. It’s a high carb diet, not a high fat diet, that increases your risk of heart disease.

“That being said, not all fats are created equal,” warns **Dr. Splaver**.

When you browse the web you’ll see keto diet enthusiasts promoting pork rinds for snacks, bacon for breakfast, and using bacon fat or lard as their preferred cooking fat, all of which are saturated fats. While a ketogenic diet does include all types of fat, both saturated and unsaturated, it’s recommended that you choose a higher proportion of unsaturated fat.

Fisher explains that, “saturated fats such as ghee, coconut oil, palm oil, butter and animal fat are encouraged primarily for cooking, due to their higher smoke point.” These fats are more stable at a higher heat and less likely to oxidize and cause free radical damage or other adverse health problems.

However, it’s still important to be aware of how much saturated fat you consume. “All saturated fats or hydrogenated oils like margarine or Crisco are problematic for your cardiovascular health,” says **Dr. Splaver**.

Fisher elaborates saying, “there still remains recent research that notes increased risk of coronary heart disease with higher intake of saturated fats. It was noted that replacing just one percent of these saturated fats with heart healthy fats and plant proteins resulted in a 6 to 8 percent reduction in heart disease risk. For this reason, when following a ketogenic diet, the majority of the fat should come from monounsaturated fat sources.”

The exception to the rule are Medium Chain Triglycerides (MCT) such as coconut oil, as these different types of saturated fats are utilized as immediate energy.

Are there side effects of going low carb keto?

If you choose to follow a ketogenic diet, you will see it is not without it’s side effects, at least for a short period of time.

When the body switches from using carbohydrates to fat as fuel it causes a decrease in the amount of sodium in the blood, the consequences of which can be very uncomfortable leg cramps.

Also be prepared that “reduced fiber intake from fruit and vegetables can increase the risk of constipation. Bowel changes may also occur as the body adjusts to the dietary changes,” says **Fisher**. Additionally, you should expect to experience decreased energy and headaches, at least for a short period of time. The keto-flu is also a very real side effect as the body transitions to a ketogenic diet.

Common symptoms of the keto flu include:

- Brain fog
- Fatigue
- Dizziness
- Insomnia

“Symptoms usually subside within a few weeks. Therefore, easing into the ketogenic diet and maintaining adequate fluid and sodium intake can help lessen these symptoms,” adds **Fisher**.

Is the ketogenic diet safe?

The answer is yes.

“There is little evidence this diet is damaging to your health as long as the fats you choose are the heart healthy ones,” says **Dr. Splaver**.

Monounsaturated-rich foods include:

- Avocado
- Avocado oil
- Olives
- Olive oil
- Macadamia nut oil
- High oleic sunflower oil
- Nuts and seeds

So enjoy your fat, just remember to choose monounsaturated fats as your main source of it.

<https://www.zwivel.com/blog/is-the-ketogenic-diet-safe/>