High Protein Diets: More Questions Than Answers

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New studies suggest that high-protein diets may be helpful in losing weight. Yet their findings raise questions about the long-term effects on weight and health.

Researchers at Duke University found that people on a high-protein, very low-carbohydrate diet for six months lost more weight than people following a traditional, moderately low-fat diet. Such diets have raised concern because of their high fat content from unlimited meat and eggs. Intake of fiber and health-promoting phytochemicals was extremely low on the Duke diet, derived from no more than two cups of salad and one cup of low-carb vegetables a day. To the researchers' surprise, cholesterol levels did not go up, and triglycerides (a fat that increases heart risks) went down.

Research at Purdue University suggests that part of a high-protein/low-carb diet's success may be because protein satisfies hunger more effectively than carbohydrate or fat. A review of studies on the safety and effectiveness of high-protein diets in *Nutrition Reviews* notes that decreased calorie consumption may be due to less hunger, not because of boredom with the limited food choices. And some studies suggest that the digestion and metabolism of protein may burn up more calories than that of carbohydrate, which over time could help achieve weight loss.

One of the major controversies about high-protein diets relates to their fat content. Duke University researchers were surprised to find that blood cholesterol did not increase despite the high intake of saturated fat. They suggested that perhaps the benefits of weight loss can overcome the potential negatives of high dietary fat. On the other hand,

many studies show cholesterol increases with diets high in saturated fat. Even if blood cholesterol levels don't increase, that alone doesn't make a diet healthy. Studies show that high-fat meals damage blood vessels by reducing blood levels of nitric oxide. Excess dietary fat is also considered a promoter of cancer development.

Unlike the Duke research, several studies that focused on the weight, metabolism and blood chemistry benefits of high-protein diets limited protein to low-fat items. Although low-fat protein might make the diets safer, eating a high level of protein in itself raises health concerns. When protein is digested, the remnants must be filtered and excreted by our kidneys, which increases calcium in the urine. This raises the risk of kidney stones and bone loss. An evaluation of high-protein diets by Tufts University researchers concludes that these diets are clearly not safe for those at risk for kidney disease or kidney stones, including anyone with diabetes.

Obesity raises the risk of several types of cancer, yet losing weight with high-protein, low-carbohydrate diets could raise the cancer risk by limiting some of our best cancer-fighters. Many experts question whether a diet that reduces antioxidants and natural phytochemicals from vegetables, fruits, whole grains and beans can really promote overall health. Instead of severely limiting all carbohydrates, some more moderate plans cut back drastically on sugar and refined carbohydrates, but still include healthful portions of vegetables, fruits, whole grains and beans.

Questions still remain about the long-term effects of these untested diets. While waiting for independent, scientific assessments, dieters can follow the current best advice from health experts on losing weight: reduced portion sizes of foods, with a typical meal

that keeps meat, fish, or chicken to three ounces and fills the rest of the plate with vegetables, fruits, whole grains and beans.

If you need help to improve your eating habits and prevent weight gain, *Shape Your Future…Your Weigh!*™ can help. Contact your base Health and Wellness Center (HAWC) or Dietitian for more information.