

Look to Research, Ability to Stick With Diets *By Paul Edgecomb, MD*

Trying to lose weight? You're not alone. One of the most common questions I get is, "How do I lose weight quickly, safely, and without much effort?" The simple answer is "You can't."

For most people, losing weight is NOT easy and WILL require some effort. When deciding on a diet type to follow, there is fortunately lots of research regarding safety and effectiveness. Let's review the four popular diet plans: Atkins, South Beach, Mediterranean, and a traditional Low-Fat/Low-Cal and compare content, heart-healthiness, and effectiveness in weight-loss.

Traditional Low-Fat/Low-Calorie: Total calorie intake is reduced; typical targets are 1500 calories/day for women; 1800 calories/day for men. Limits total calories from fat to 30% or less.

Mediterranean: Total calorie intake is reduced, as above. While there are no specific targets as to the proportions of fat, carbohydrates or protein, the TYPES of fats are limited: nuts and olive oil are fine while red meats are avoided and replaced with poultry or fish.

Atkins: There is NO calorie limitation but carbohydrates are sharply reduced while most forms of fat and protein are approved.

South Beach: Combines the best features of the Mediterranean diet and Atkins diet; certain carbohydrates, such as potatoes, white rice, and white bread are limited, fat and protein are OK, while red meats should be avoided.

Results: A 2008 research study that compared the Low-Fat/Low-Cal, Mediterranean and Atkins diets revealed that weight loss was similar with all three, although the Low-Fat/Low-Cal was a little less effective than the other two. The other (somewhat surprising) result was that the Atkins diet did NOT have any adverse effects on cholesterol levels; in fact it improved cholesterol slightly.

A 2010 study showed that low-fat vs. low-carbohydrate diets produce similar weight loss. Another recent study showed that those who ate a mostly plant-based diet lived longer and had less heart disease than those whose fat and protein came mostly from animals.

Summary: WHICH diet you choose is not terribly important; you can lose weight with almost any of the popular diet plans. The key is picking a diet that's healthy and can be followed long-term. Success requires a commitment to making lasting changes in your eating habits – not just temporarily, but for lifelong maintenance of a healthy weight.

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