

The Keto Diet: Is it Right for You?

It seems that every year a fad diet becomes a spotlight. This year the ketogenic or “keto” diet is the popular diet this year. A ketogenic diet (KD) is very low in carbohydrate, moderate in protein and high in fat. The diet was originally developed to treat epilepsy in children, however researchers are now exploring the Keto diet for cancer, obesity, type 2 diabetes, Alzheimer’s disease, inflammation and movement and neurological disorders treatment. Keto for weight loss has stirred up conversation in the nutrition community. Before deciding if this diet is for you, it is important to explore the issues related to the diet. The resource for this article comes from Penn State Extension.

The ketogenic diet is characterized by a reduction in carbohydrate intake and increasing fat and protein consumption. The body goes into a state called ketosis. Normally, carbohydrates are the body’s preferred source of energy. However, when carbohydrates are not available, other sources must be used for energy. During the process of ketosis the body breaks down fat, turns it into ketones and uses those ketones for energy. The body uses fat as the main energy source.

There is no standard ketogenic diet and the amount of carbohydrate, protein and fat consumed while following this diet can vary. On the average, the recommended carbohydrate intake for someone on the keto diet is approximately 20 to 30 grams per day. This would equal to the amount of carbohydrate in a small to medium sized apple. The Modified Atkins Diet is a type of Keto diet that limits carbohydrate to 20 grams per day, but does not restrict protein, fat or total calories. Because the keto diet is a high fat diet, the majority of an individual’s calories come from fats. In fact, fat makes up about 70 percent of the daily calorie intake, while protein makes up about 25 percent. Typical foods a person following Keto eats are fish, poultry, other meats, and whole eggs, most types of cheese and moderate amounts of nuts, butter, margarine, cream, mayonnaise and oils. Limited foods include fruits, starchy type vegetables, grains and high-sugar peppers, onions, tomatoes and sugar.

The differences between the keto diet and normal, healthy eating plan has led to questions about the safety and long-term effects for weight loss. A 4 and 6 month study comparing Keto to a low fat diet showed the keto group lost 6 percent more body weight on average than the low-fat diet group. The study also showed improvements in blood sugar, cholesterol and triglyceride levels in participants following Keto. There were adverse effects including headache, constipation, muscle cramps, and fatigue in those following keto. Long term effectiveness has not been researched. Also the ability to maintain weight loss and side effects for more than one year is unknown.

There is a difference between the Keto diet and the USDA Dietary Guidelines for Americans. The 2015-2020 guidelines recommend consuming a healthy eating pattern that accounts for all foods and beverages within an appropriate calorie level. The guidelines identify a healthy eating pattern to include a variety of vegetables, fruits, especially whole fruits, and grains, at least half of which should be whole grains. These are food groups that are restricted with the keto diet. Also, the guidelines recommend consumptions of heart healthy, unsaturated fats, such as oils and a reduction of saturated fat found in meat and high fat dairy foods to less than 10 percent of total calories per day. A diet too high in saturated fat increases the risk for heart disease.

Before starting any diet it is important to assess the safety and potential impact on your health. The keto diet is not recommended for people with kidney problems, liver disease, gastroesophageal reflux (GERD), heart problems or chronic constipation. People with diabetes should talk to their doctor to make sure this diet does not interfere with their medications or other health complications. Do not begin any new or old diet without first talking to your doctor or a registered dietitian to see if it appropriate for you.