

Position Statement on Very Low Carbohydrate Diets

Questions and Answers

Introduction

Very low carbohydrate diets have appeared in the media and popular press for many years. To help answer common questions about these types of diets, the Heart Foundation undertook a review of the scientific literature and prepared a position statement.

This information sheet provides some answers to common questions about very low carbohydrate diets, based on the evidence from the Heart Foundation's *Position Statement on Very Low Carbohydrate Diets*.

What is a very low carbohydrate diet?

The average carbohydrate intake in Australia and other Western countries is 200-300 g per day or approximately 45% of total energy intake.

The literature has no clear definition of what a very low carbohydrate diet is. For the purposes of the position paper the Heart Foundation defined 'very low carbohydrate diets' as containing less than 100 g of carbohydrate per day. Very low carbohydrate diets may also be termed 'high protein' although not all high protein diets for weight loss can be called very low carbohydrate diets.

Generally in the early stages of most very low carbohydrate diets, elimination or severe restriction of carbohydrate is recommended (less than 10 g of carbohydrate per day). The diets then contain a maintenance intake of only 40-50 g of carbohydrate per day.

Does the Heart Foundation recommend very low carbohydrate diets?

Based on current available research, the Heart Foundation does not recommend very low carbohydrate diets for long-term weight loss. These types of diets often include foods high in saturated fat, can lack adequate amounts of vitamins and minerals and the long-term consequences of the diets are not known.

The Heart Foundation will continue to monitor the evidence in this area as it emerges.

Why does the Heart Foundation not recommend very low carbohydrate diets?

It is not clear whether very low carbohydrate diets are safe for long term-health. These diets often recommend an eating pattern which is high in saturated fat. Saturated fat is the type of fat which raises blood cholesterol levels. To reduce your risk of heart disease, the Heart Foundation recommends you reduce your intake of foods high in saturated fats.

Very low carbohydrate diets are also often high in total fat and protein and low in plant-based foods. Plant-based foods such as fruit, vegetables and

wholegrain cereals are the foods that help reduce the risk of heart disease. The dietary pattern recommended in very low carbohydrate diets is also often lacking some of the key nutrients required for overall good health, including folic acid, dietary fibre and calcium. As a high protein intake can lead to increased calcium loss, very low carbohydrate diets may increase the long-term risk of bone disease such as osteoporosis.

It is not clear what effect very low carbohydrate diets have on your risk of heart disease. Therefore, the Heart Foundation recommends that anyone attempting to lose weight by following a very low carbohydrate diet, should try to avoid foods high in saturated fat. The Heart Foundation also recommends that if you are attempting a very low carbohydrate diet you should see your doctor to monitor heart disease risk factors such as blood cholesterol levels.

What does the Heart Foundation recommend to achieve weight loss?

It is possible to achieve a healthy weight that is right for you, without going for quick-fix solutions. Remember that weight loss and weight maintenance are not simple and require life-long changes. For heart health, the Heart Foundation recommends an eating pattern that is low in saturated fat, and does not exclude protective foods such as wholegrain cereals, fruit and vegetables.

The key to achieving and maintaining a healthy weight is to enjoy healthy eating and regular physical activity. Healthy weight management is about balancing the kilojoules coming into your body through food and drinks with the kilojoules being used by your body through day-to-day activities as well as planned regular physical activity. For weight loss to occur, it is necessary to use up more kilojoules through physical activity than are consumed from food and drinks.

More information

More information and practical tips on how to attain and maintain a healthy weight can be found in the following Heart Foundation publications:

- Healthy Weight Guide
- Position Statement on Very Low Carbohydrate Diets
- The Weight Loss Checklist

To order, please call Heartline, the Heart Foundation's national telephone information service, on 1300 36 27 87 (local call cost). A range of information is also available at www.heartfoundation.com.au.

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