



For Swimmers

By Alan W. Arata, Ph.D. © 2004

It is hard to go to the grocery store these days without seeing the word Atkins in nearly every aisle. Whoppers can now be ordered ‘without the bun’ and sub sandwiches with a wrap instead of bread. The Atkins—or low carbohydrate, high fat and protein—Diet has swept the nation. Undoubtedly some of these Atkins dieters are parents of swimmers, which is why I’m writing this article.

Now, many of my colleagues think that the Atkins Diet is a fad that will disappear in a few years. As a multi-billion dollar low carbohydrate food industry has already spun up around the diet, it may be more like 10 to 20 years. The Atkins Diet *does* work. I have seen people lose 75 pounds in a very short time (a couple of months) on Atkins. But is it healthy to lose 75 pounds in a short time eating a high fat diet? No. Then again, is it healthy to be 75 pounds over weight? No.

The truth is that the right way to lose weight 10 years ago is still the right way to lose weight today. Eat a low fat diet and exercise. If people burn more calories than they take in, they *will* lose weight—this is universal no matter what diet is used. It is healthy to eat a low fat diet and healthy to exercise. Many people, however, don’t take the time to exercise, and it is true that carbohydrates are stored in the body as fat if not burned. So, a low carbohydrate diet works for them. Now the goal of this article is to emphasize the following—the Atkins Diet and exercise of moderate to high intensity (like competitive swimming which is very high intensity) *don’t* go together. Carbohydrates are the energy source burned during high intensity exercise (i.e. swimming) and the Atkins Diet hardly provides enough to make it through a warm-up. This leaves swimmers having to perform on fats, which is like “hitting the wall” or “bonking” before they hardly get started. Fats can only be used as fuel for the muscles at *lower* intensities—meaning swimmers will have to swim slower. This is neither good for racing nor for training.

My concern is that swimming parents who want to change their own diets to include more fats and proteins, will also change the diets of their swimmers. It’s hard not to. Families plan meals at home and usually everybody eats the same thing. This can be detrimental to your swimmer’s success. Swimmers need carbohydrates not only for swimming meets but also to a greater extent for practices. So, for you adults who are on or considering the Atkins Diet, make sure that your meals have fats, proteins *and* carbohydrates. *You* eat the fats and proteins and your swimmers should eat a balanced diet including lots of carbohydrates (25% fats, 15% proteins and 60% carbohydrates). Think of the old nursery rhyme, “Jack Sprat could eat no fat, his wife could eat no lean, so between the two of them, they licked the patten clean.” That can be you Atkins parents out there and your fast-moving, carb-needing swimmers.

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