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# Low carbohydrate diets in family practice: what can we learn from an internet-based support group

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## Abstract

The Active Low-Carber Forums (ALCF) is an on-line support group started in 2000 which currently has more than 86,000 members. Data collected from posts to the forum and from an on-line survey were used to determine the behavior and attitudes of people on low carbohydrate diets. Members were asked to complete a voluntary 27-item questionnaire over the internet. Our major findings are as follows: survey respondents, like the membership at large, were mostly women and mostly significantly overweight, a significant number intending to and, in many cases, succeeding at losing more than 100 lbs. The great majority of members of ALCF identify themselves as following the Atkins diet or some variation of it. Although individual posts on the forum and in the narrative part of our survey are critical of professional help, we found that more than half of respondents saw a physician before or during dieting and, of those who did, about half received support from the physician. Another 28 % found the physician initially neutral but supportive after positive results were produced. Using the same criteria as the National Weight Registry (without follow-up) – 30 lbs or more lost and maintained for more than one year – it was found that more than 1400 people had successfully used low carb methods. In terms of food consumed, the perception of more than half of respondents were that they ate less than before the diet and whereas high protein, high fat sources replaced carbohydrate to some extent, the major change indicated by survey-takers is a large increase in green vegetables and a large decrease in fruit intake. Government or health agencies were not sources of information for dieters in this group and a collection of narrative comments indicates a high level of satisfaction, indeed enthusiasm for low carbohydrate dieting.

The results provide both a tabulation of the perceived behavior of a significant number of dieters using low carbohydrate strategies as well as a collection of narratives that provide a human perspective on what it is like to be on such a diet. An important conclusion for the family physician is that it becomes possible to identify a diet that is used by many people where the primary principle is replacement of starch and sugar-containing foods with non-starchy vegetables, with little addition of fat or protein. Used by many people who identify themselves as being on the Atkins diet, such a strategy provides the advantages of carbohydrate-restricted diets but is less iconoclastic than the popular

perception and therefore more acceptable to traditional nutritionists. It is reasonable for family practitioners to turn this observation into a recommendation for patients for weight control and other health problems.



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