



NEWS RELEASE

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Low Carbohydrate Foods

Everywhere you go people are talking about low carbohydrate, high protein diets. Potato and orange juice consumption are down; egg and beef consumption is up. But now “low carbohydrate” foods are hitting the market place. Popular fast food restaurants are introducing new “low carb” burgers, and there is “low carb” beer as well as “low carb” bread and tortillas.

“Low-carb” is not what it seems. There is much debate in the scientific community regarding any benefits these foods might offer for weight loss or nutrition. If you replace carbohydrates with protein (that’s the main change), you still have just as many calories. Furthermore, the labels are, essentially, meaningless. The FDA has no definition of “low-carbohydrate” and has never approved any low-carb labels. Since there is no legal definition for “low carbohydrate” foods, any food can be so labeled.

Have you ever wondered how food manufacturers change the carbohydrate value of some of you favorite foods? Here’s how the carbs are reduced in various foods:

- Refined wheat flour is replaced with soy flour (higher in protein), soy protein, or wheat protein.
- Extra fiber, such as wheat bran, oat bran, or other fiber is added (this is not a bad thing, but read on).
- They add high-fat ingredients such as nuts (again, not so terrible: nuts are good food, containing healthy fats).
- Sugar is replaced with sugar alcohols (maltitol, lactitol, or sorbitol) or artificial sweeteners. This is a common practice for the manufacture of sugarless or “dietetic” candy.
- For beers, certain chemicals are used in the brewing process to reduce carbohydrates in the brew. But the result is not very different from “lite” beers

These changes are not unhealthy. In fact, consuming high fiber foods is very beneficial. Nutritionists have been promoting high fiber food for decades. Fiber is beneficial in reduction of many chronic diseases such as some cancers and heart diseases. It also helps you feel full longer and aids the body in the elimination process.

An important point to remember is some of the “low carb” products often have nearly as many carbs as their regular counterpart. The labels disguise this fact with several tricks. Frequently they subtract certain carbs, such as fiber and sugar alcohols and provide a separate section listing a lower number, which designates the remaining ones “effective carbs” or “net impact carbs.” The thought is that since fiber, for instance, doesn’t affect blood sugar the way other carbs do, then those carbs don’t count. What you end up with is a “net” carb count.

Not only can foods have as many carbs, they can also have nearly as many calories as their regular counterparts, and cutting calories is still the key to weight control. Protein and carbohydrates have the same

amount of calories, 4 calories per gram and fat has twice as many calories as carbs do, and fat has more than twice as many calories.

* In the meantime, our advice: Don't be fooled by low-carb foods. There's no evidence that they'll help you lose weight. They are not significantly more nutritious or less caloric than many regular foods. And they eat up food dollars better spent on plain good healthy foods such as fresh fruits and vegetables.

Source: University of California Berkeley Wellness Newsletter, School of Public Health, and January 2004