Benefits of ketogenic diets

Dear Sir:

In this age of the obesity epidemic, some careful work reported in the May issue of the Journal by Johnston et al (1) provides more information to help solve the problem. With strict controls in a 6-wk trial, they directly compared 2 diets: a ketogenic very-low-carbohydrate (KLC) diet and a nonketogenic low-carbohydrate (NLC) diet. They concluded that the KLC and NLC diets were equally effective in reducing body weight and insulin resistance, but the KLC diet was associated with several adverse metabolic and emotional effects. Thus, the use of ketogenic diets for weight loss is not warranted. This conclusion is amplified by the article’s title and by its final sentence: “Patients should know that there is no apparent metabolic advantage associated with ketosis during dieting.”

As shown in Table 1 of the article by Johnston et al, the 2 diets were equal in energy content (1500 kcal/d). The major nutrients provided daily by the KLC and NLC diets, respectively, were as follows: 33 and 157 g carbohydrate, 125 and 117 g protein, 100 and 50 g total fat, 35 and 13 g saturated fat, 34 and 16 g monounsaturated fat, 14 and 7 g polyunsaturated fat, 15 and 30 g fiber, and 620 and 230 mg cholesterol. Could some of the adverse metabolic effects reported in this study support the long-expressed concerns about the high-fat Atkins diet? Specifically, should the conclusion of Johnston et al have been that a ketogenic diet that is high in saturated fat and cholesterol is not warranted for weight loss? It can be shown that a blanket rejection of ketogenic diets for weight loss is not warranted.

It is safe to assume that no species could have survived millions of years if its members could not tolerate occasional brief periods of natural starvation, which itself is ketogenic. In fact, everyone approaches ketogenesis in the sleep portion of every diurnal cycle. If only water is ingested, stores of liver glycogen decrease steadily to zero in the first 12–24 h (2, 3). As noted decades ago, after zero calories are ingested, the maximum possible rate of weight loss occurs, and there will likely not be a flat weight-loss plateau. Of course, the ingestion of zero calories for an extended time is not healthful because of the total lack of vital nutrients of all kinds.

The protein-sparing modified fast (PSMF) is a human-engineered variation on natural starvation designed to extend the period of rapid weight loss and low hunger while preventing the body from catabolizing itself. Because of the special biochemical importance of glucose, essentially the same changes as described above for starvation take place if little glucose-producing food (carbohydrate) is ingested, despite the fact that protein and fat are still being ingested. Ketostix (Bayer Corporation, Elkhart, IN) can be used to verify the presence of ketosis in ≈3 d. Enough protein must be eaten to provide for the usual daily needs for amino acids plus enough to supply the now-required gluconeogenesis. The total amount of protein needed is not large, ≈1.3 g protein/kg ideal body wt (5). In this 1976 article, Bistrian et al conclude that “For diabetics with some endogenous insulin reserve, the PSMF offers significant advantages for weight reduction, including preservation of lean body mass (as reflected in nitrogen balance) and withdrawal of exogenous insulin.” The small amount of carbohydrate allowed must be chosen carefully to maximize the nutrients per gram of carbohydrate.

A controlled study compared reports of appetite and symptoms in 28 obese subjects randomly assigned to either a 500-kcal PSMF or a 1200-kcal balanced diet (6). During the first comparison month, the subjects who consumed the PSMF lost significantly more weight and reported significantly less hunger than did the subjects who consumed the balanced diet; the former group reported significantly greater problems with cold intolerance, constipation, dizziness, dry skin, and fatigue. A ketogenic diet was developed early in the 20th century to successfully treat children with drug refractory epilepsy (7). A direct comparison showed that saturated fat is undesirable even when a high-fat ketogenic diet is required, as in special treatments of refractory epilepsy (8). A 2-wk carefully controlled patient study showed that a ketogenic diet was beneficial for the control of weight and blood glucose concentrations in diabetic patients. Cutting carbohydrate consumption to ≈20 g/d produced a spontaneous reduction in calories of ≈1000 kcal/d with little change in hunger, diet satisfaction, or energy levels (9).

Clearly, one major advantage of the ketogenic diet is that it allows the calorie intake to be cut drastically without producing ravenous hunger. A suggestion for extending the benefits of ketogenic weight-loss diets would be to alternate 1–3 wk of the PSMF with longer periods of the Heller plan (10). The Heller plan allows for one full, healthful, balanced meal plus snacks daily that follow a PSMF protocol. This would enable the consumption of useful amounts of vital plant foods while taking the body back and forth through the entire cycle of emptying (23 h) and refilling (1 h) the liver’s glycogen stores.

No conflicts of interest were reported.

Nicholas J Krilanovich

310 Myrtle Street
Apartment 306
Mount Vernon, WA 98273
E-mail: njkrilanuch@hotmail.com

References


10. Bistrian BR, et al. The Heller plan (10). The Heller plan allows for one full, healthful, balanced meal plus snacks daily that follow a PSMF protocol. This would enable the consumption of useful amounts of vital plant foods while taking the body back and forth through the entire cycle of emptying (23 h) and refilling (1 h) the liver’s glycogen stores.

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310 Myrtle Street
Apartment 306
Mount Vernon, WA 98273
E-mail: njkrilanuch@hotmail.com

2-fold (10). Methylglyoxal and its byproducts are considered a significant cause of blood vessel damage. We continue to claim that the use of ketogenic diets for weight loss is not warranted.

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Carol S Johnston
Andrea M White

Department of Nutrition
Arizona State University
7001 E Williams Field Road
Mesa, AZ 85212
E-mail: carol.johnston@asu.edu

Sherrie L Tjonn

Conscious Cuisine
Scottsdale, AZ

Pamela D Swan

Department of Exercise & Wellness
Arizona State University
7001 E Williams Field Road
Mesa, AZ 85212

Heather Hutchins
Barry Sears

Inflammation Research Foundation
Marblehead, MA

REFERENCES