

4 Things You Should Know About the Keto Diet

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The keto diet is championed as the best way to lose weight and some people go so far as to say that it'll improve your thinking and sleep and joie de vivre. While some people have experienced great success accomplishing their health goals, many people don't, and it's not their fault that the diet isn't working.

It's probably a combination of:

- The keto diet being a fad diet, with cute meal plans made by well-intentioned bloggers on Pinterest that aren't grounded in research.
- It's an old diet that was used as an epilepsy therapy but now shows promise as a weight-loss therapy.
- **It's unsustainable and unrealistic for most people.**
- The studies supporting the keto diet's benefits are often not long-term, and lack diversity in terms of the age and pre-existing health conditions of their participants.

If you are considering a keto diet, or if you've heard of it but don't know what it is, or if you've tried it but it didn't work, this article is for you.

What is the keto diet?

Generally, the human body prefers to use blood sugar as fuel, but this requires that we consume a decent amount of carbohydrates daily. If we shift the way we eat away from carbohydrates, our bodies will break down body fat and turn it into ketones. Then our body uses those ketones as fuel instead of glucose.

“Keto” is short for “ketogenic”—ketogenic meaning that it causes our bodies to release ketones into our bloodstream as fuel for our bodily functions. Therefore, a ketogenic diet is one that promotes this natural biological process by reducing our intake of carbs. Many people describe keto diets with words like “high fat” or “low carb.”

In order to enter ketosis, or the state where our body produces ketones, we have to reduce carbs well below what most people eat, somewhere between 20 and 50 grams of carbs. We also have to be on that diet for a few days before we enter ketosis at all, and for some people this will take longer.

There’s a lot of promise that keto diets support weight loss, especially in the short term, but it’s not a forgiving diet. There was a longer-term study that found that it helped people lose weight and keep weight off, but they also ate a monitored strict diet as part of a lab study. Plus, they were given an engineered supplement to ensure they didn’t miss any important micronutrients as a result of not eating a diversity of foods.

So what should you know about the keto diet before (or after) you’ve tried it?

1. It’s a fad diet.

Being a fad doesn’t negate the research supporting the keto diet’s ability to help people lose weight. **It does mean that there are some bolder, anecdotal claims that aren’t supported by evidence or research.**

What we know about the keto diet is this:

- It’s used as a therapy for epilepsy.
- It could speed up healing after strokes (for mice).
- It could help people lose weight.

Most other claims—that it improves your thinking, your quality of sleep, your energy levels, your mood—are anecdotal. They could be true, but since most of these claims come from people who aren’t part of a clinical trial, there could be confounding factors involved, like starting a keto diet and an exercise regimen around the same time.



2. It's not new.

In the previous point, you'll see that the last two bullet points are hedged, or not as absolute, as the first bullet point. The keto diet has been used since the early 1900s as a treatment for epilepsy, which means that it's been around for 100 years.

Most of the recent interest in keto diets stems from a Western obsession with losing weight. This original context of development—epileptic treatment—is important, because the weight-loss is more of a potential side effect, if you adhere strictly to the diet.

The keto diet shows that the recommended proportion of macronutrients is not one-size-fits-all. You can live a healthy life and play around with the proportion of fats to carbs to protein in your diet to find what works best for you.

3. It's unsustainable.

While transitioning to a general low-carb diet is possible to maintain, keto diets require strict adherence for your body to continue producing ketones. Not only that, but some people experience negative effects associated with entering ketosis.

Unsustainability is a hallmark of most fad diets; they require extreme lifestyle changes that are unreasonable for most people to make. When people point out that they didn't experience the quoted benefits of a fad diet, the first reaction is something like, "You didn't do it right" or "You didn't do it long enough."

In reality, though, a diet that can't withstand the pressures of everyday life just won't work.

While some people recommend using a keto diet for a short amount of time as a sort of dietary reset, there is also the dangers of yo-yo dieting to consider. Generally, short and intensive changes to a diet followed by reverting to old dietary patterns undermines any health benefit from a dietary change, with sometimes long-term adverse effects. **If you want long-term results, you need long-term effort, and the keto diet is not recommended for long-term effort.**

4. It lacks long-term and diverse studies.

Speaking of long-term, most studies supporting the keto diet's claim to weight loss aren't long-term. They show that the diet is effective at helping people lose weight in a short amount of time by following a strict diet, but the few long-term studies have shown that over time, the weight loss ends up being comparable to other healthy and less strict diets.

Also, most of these studies involved overweight non-elderly adults with no complicating conditions. Do the elderly have a chance at making this work for them? There's also some concern that ketogenic diets could exacerbate existing kidney problems. **While the keto diet's generally deemed a safe diet, can we universally recommend it?**



Final Thoughts

The keto diet, like any other diet, is not bad. It works for many people, who will continue to praise the diet all over social media and the internet. If anything, the keto diet will be helpful in

shifting public perception away from thinking dietary fat is bad to recognizing that—surprise!—we need a mix of all three macronutrients in order to feel our best.

As with all other dietary patterns, the keto diet works best when:

- you pay attention to the quality of food that you eat.
- you consume a diversity of foods.
- you avoid overly processed foods.
- you pay attention to your bodily cues.

I would argue that more than cute meal plans, teaching people the above skills would go the farthest in helping all of us eat in ways that support our health. If you're looking for a good primer on how to eat well but not on a diet, the book *In Defense of Food* by Michael Pollan does a great job of the first three points.

As for the last one, so many of us use food, like caffeine or sugar or alcohol, to *numb* ourselves to the demands our bodies make for our health. Perhaps the best benefit of any diet, the keto diet included, is helping people transition away from numbing themselves out to paying attention to how they feel.

This may be the real reason why people who go on the keto diet think they sleep better. It's not the diet but the attentiveness to their body that has changed. No matter where we are in our health journey, we can all benefit from being more connected to our body, and you don't need the keto diet to do so.

Sources and Further Reading

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