

Eco-Atkins (Vegetarian Atkins) Diet

The new diet “Eco-Atkins” or “Vegetarian Atkins” has received much publicity recently in women’s magazines, in newspapers, and on the Internet.

Please note that the term “Eco-Atkins” was made a popular name for this diet by the media; the name was not created by the original research authors and has not received approval by Atkins™.

Researchers at St. Michael’s Hospital in Toronto, led by David J.A. Jenkins MD, created the diet to see if it would promote weight loss, but also decrease low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol levels, which the traditional Atkins Diet does not.

The diet plan

The plan keeps the same proportions of protein and carbohydrate as the original Atkins Diet, but all of the protein is plant based, most often from soy and gluten. The final results were published in the *Archives of Internal Medicine* in June 2009.

A total of 47 overweight men and women were split into two groups, one group using the “Eco-Atkins” plan and the other a lacto-ovo vegetarian diet. Individuals in both groups lost an average of 8.8 pounds after 4 weeks and had reduced their blood pressure, cholesterol, and triglyceride levels. However, the participants who were put on the Eco-Atkins Diet saw a sharper reduction in their LDL levels (a 0.6% reduction average) and garnered more improvements in their ratio of high-density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol to total cholesterol. The Eco-Atkins Diet also seemed to produce beneficial changes in levels and ranges of apolipoproteins, proteins that bind to fat in the body.

Study participants who were placed on the Eco-Atkins plan ate a diet that contained healthy fats, soy foods, beans, nuts, seeds, no-starch gluten products, fruits, and vegetables. Approximately 30% of their total intake was from protein, 40% from fat, and 30% from carbohydrate. The average daily intake of carbohydrates was around 130 grams, which is steep by Atkins’ protocol, but is considered the bare minimum needed by the brain to function appropriately and is the minimum recommended by the National Academy of Sciences Institute of Medicine. No starchy foods, such as enriched white bread, rice, or baked goods, were permitted.

In contrast, the lacto-ovo vegetarian diet provided roughly 60% of the total calories from carbohydrate, 15% from protein, and 25% from fat.

The bottom line

The diet slashed calories so drastically, with participants only eating about 60% of their estimated caloric needs for weight maintenance with allowance for exercise, that the weight loss is not at all surprising. An assumption that weight loss resulted from the proportions of protein, fat, and carbohydrate called for by the plan would seem premature. However, the high-fiber content of the diet most likely kept the participants more satisfied than if they were on another diet plan. The fiber content also is a major reason for the decreases in cholesterol that were observed.

Unfortunately, this strict vegan diet does not allow for calcium-rich dairy products, a major flaw according to some experts who are concerned about osteoporosis. Although less restrictive than the traditional Atkins Diet, this diet is still strict and might not work as a long-term possibility for most people. Many of the major principles of the diet, however, remain as good advice:

- Consume more plant-based protein in place of animal-based sources
- Choose healthy oils
- Eat a diet that does not include many processed foods

Most nutrition experts do not recommend this plan yet, and are calling for long-term studies to prove both sustainability and safety. Dr Dean Ornish noted that the diet used in this study is very similar to the one that he has devoted his life to researching and advocating.

References and recommended readings

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