

The Courier-Journal

Louisville, KY

Thursday, November 3, 2005

NUTRITION

What's cookin' now?

As Atkins fizzles, America awaits the next fad diet

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You may have noticed: America's history of fad dieting is in a lull.

It would seem that trying to lose weight is still a national pastime if you examine the shelves of diet books at your local bookstore or library and check best-seller lists.

Marketing research sources tell us that about three-fourths of Americans go on a diet at some point in their lives and that at any given time 25 percent of the population is dieting.

But no single diet -- low-fat, high-fat, low-carb, high-carb, low-sugar, low-glycemic, high-fiber, blood type or liquid -- is creating a real buzz.

Oh, we're dabbling with the way French women eat and thinking about the minutes between meals, but that's nothing compared to the Big Diet that swept the nation not very long ago -- the low-carb regimen bearing the name of the late Dr. Robert C. Atkins.

Atkins' influence put bread makers out of business, persuaded restaurants to redo their menus to include low-carb offerings, led beer companies to produce low-carb beers and even got fast-food giant Burger King to wrap its Whopper in lettuce rather than a bun.

But on Aug. 1, Atkins Nutritionals Inc. filed for bankruptcy.

Sellersburg (Ind.) Police Chief Pat Bradshaw had grown tired of the Atkins regimen, finding it either too demanding or too boring.

Bradshaw, who took the Atkins Diet plunge in late 2003, following in the footsteps of a relative, could eat just "meat and green stuff" for only so long.

He dropped 40 pounds after about four months on Atkins. But still wanting to lose more, he switched to Weight Watchers, where he learned about making food choices, nutrition, portions, exercise and group support. In time, he reached his weight goal.

In Weight Watchers classes across the nation, the participants called themselves "the low-carb refugees," said Kristi Widmar, a spokeswoman for Weight Watchers.

But how long can Americans go without a dieting fad?

"We're in the lull between the diets. There's not really any fad diet approach that is widely grabbing people's attention," said Karen Collins, a dietitian and spokeswoman for the American Institute for Cancer Research, which fosters research on diet and cancer prevention.

"But it seems we've gone through them all, low-fat, high-fat, low-carb, high-carb," she said.

Ruth Kava, director of nutrition for the American Council on Science and Health, figures a new diet will come along that Americans will embrace.

"Self-help books have been around awhile. Plus maybe we have too much leisure time," she suggested. "It's human nature to want to find a quick fix."

She believes the best things people can do are quit smoking, drink alcohol responsibly, get a reasonable amount of physical activity, prepare well-balanced meals and get enough sleep.

"And if you're going to follow an eating plan, follow one with some science behind it," she said.

Collins has a hopeful view that American consumers may be becoming more informed and sophisticated and more sensible about how they eat.

"People are realizing from watching others or from their own experience that short-term dieting doesn't work, that you lose weight and regain, lose weight and regain."

Dawn Jackson Blatner of Chicago and Noralyn Mills of Baltimore, both dietitians and spokeswomen for the American Dietetic Association, said more clients are clamoring for an individualized approach to weight loss.

"Clients realize that what works for my hairdresser doesn't necessarily work for me. A single mother with kids knows she probably can't follow the same diet as a 22-year-old guy out of college," Blatner said.

"People are also beginning to explore the atmosphere and timing of their meals. They're trying to not multitask when they eat; they're thinking about the styles of eating, like how the French linger over meals and don't eat alone."

Mills believes Americans are finally getting the message that fad diets don't work and that they must make small changes that they can live with for a lifetime.

Dietitian Malena Perdomo in Denver commented on the diet trend that recommends eating every three hours. "Not everyone needs to eat every three hours -- not everyone has the time -- and if some of my clients did, they would get fat."

The next diet trend may not be a diet at all. It may be that people will turn to nutritionists and dietitians for eating guidance the way they turn to personal trainers for exercise guidance.

Collins, of the American Institute of Cancer Research, said many more books on dieting and weight loss are being produced by certified dietitians and nutritionists than once was the case.

She also noted that many of the new diet books are concerned with issues other than the exact foods we eat.

An example is "**The Portion Teller: Smartsize Your Way to Permanent Weight Loss**" by **Lisa Young**, a New York University nutrition consultant who has worked with overweight adults and children for 15 years.

But not everyone is optimistic that, as the big holiday eating season approaches, Americans with weight problems are going to take a sensible approach.

After all, there has been a recent discussion -- mostly on the Web -- regarding a strange weight-control solution postulated by University of California-Berkeley professor Seth Roberts, described in the New York Times magazine on Sept. 11.

Roberts claims that by eating a few tablespoons of unflavored oil, such as canola, or drinking a few ounces of sugar water made with granulated fructose between meals, he lost 40 pounds.

His theory is that our bodies are regulated by a "set point" established in the Stone Age when food was scarce. It sets off a signal to eat plenty of food when it is flavorful and abundant, which works against us in today's world of abundant food choices.

He further posits that the set point can be tricked by eating between-meal snacks of tasteless oil or sugar water. He claims that by using this technique he ate less because he wasn't hungry when he sat down to meals. He calls it the Shangri-La Diet.

Critics have cautioned that fructose can raise triglycerides and promote insulin resistance.

Another dietitian, Karen Miller-Kovach, chief scientist for Weight Watchers and formerly with the Cleveland Clinic Foundation, points to a current fascination with the glycemic index as an example of consumers with rudimentary knowledge trying to translate complicated science into everyday life.

"So much science gets left behind," she lamented.

Michael Pollan, an author and professor at UC-Berkeley, has dubbed America a nation of the world's most anxious eaters.

In a country of plentiful choices, he finds we relate to food by numbers -- numbers of calories, carbs, fats and dollars. We also think of foods as "good" or "bad."

"What is striking is just how little it takes to set off one of these applecart-toppling nutritional swings in America -- a scientific study, a new government guideline, a lone crackpot with a medical degree can alter this nation's diet overnight," he wrote last year in The New York Times.

Harry Balzer, a food-industry analyst for the consumer-marketing firm NPD Group, agrees America is in a slump in diet trends but feels sure there will be another diet craze.

What will it be?

"It will be easy and allow you to do things you like to do," Balzer said. That is apparently the profile of any wildly popular diet, he said.