Low-carb dieters love poultry

By F. BAEYER NORWOOD, BRIANNA DOMNICK, KATIE SMITHSON and JODY CAMPICHE

To lose weight, consume fewer calories and/or burn more calories. Studies show that people will reduce their weight on any diet that does this. This is good news, as it allows individuals to customize their dieting strategy based on their food preferences and willingness to exercise.

This choice, for many, is a low-carbohydrate diet, which leads to greater sustained weight loss for people with "low-carb genes" than low-fat diets.

Fewer calories may be the key to weight loss, but not all calories are the same. Those who possess these low-carb genes, as well as those who particularly enjoy food products of livestock origin, might find more success if their caloric intake reduction is achieved by avoiding carbohydrates, especially simple carbs.

Low-carb diets have been particularly popular in the last two decades, but they have a much longer history. In Sweden, dieting is referred to as “banting,” which can be traced back to the 1863 booklet “Letter on Corulence Addressed to the Public” by a London, England, undertaker named William Bunting. The author discovered that he shed pounds best by purging sugars and starches from his meals.

A number of books promoting the low-carb diet in the 1990s generated considerable sales and in the early 2000s, interest became particularly intense. The term "low-carb" was hardly uttered in 1995, but after that it made periodic appearances in newspaper and magazine articles. Soon, "low-carb" was mentioned more in media than "low-fat," and in 2001, its trend growth evolved into a surge, reaching a peak in 2003.

Amid the low-carb mania, markets had no problem interpreting the consequences of such a diet. Krispy Kreme once blamed low-carb diets for its decrease in profits. At the same time, the stock price of pork producers like Smithfield Foods rose. Everyone seemed to wonder whether this was a fad or a reliable weight-loss strategy.

The low-carb mania subsided once people realized that it still requires discipline to lose weight. The search for a satisfying but low-carb meal is as futile as the search for the proverbial free lunch. Replacing bread with pork might be easy, but eating less is not.

Google search results can be analyzed only going back to 2004, but in that year, far more people searched the term “low-carb” than “low-fat”; by 2005, though, the frequency of each search was virtually identical. Still, this does not mean the diet was a passing fad. In 2011, searches for “low-carb” outnumbered “low-fat,” again, and the gap has continued to widen into 2015. Even though the mania has passed, the low-carb diet has achieved sustained popularity based not on hope but on actual experience.

The survey

For lovers of animal-derived products, the idea of being able to eat meat, dairy and eggs while also losing weight has a strong appeal, but it is not clear whether this is the case for many people.

Meat — especially red meat — has suffered a number of criticisms from health scientists. The prestigious Mayo Clinic has noted that “people who eat only plant-based foods ... generally eat fewer calories and less fat, weigh less and have a lower risk of heart disease. ... Just eating less meat has a protective effect.”

What if animal-derived products can play a role in good health by promoting a diet that works and is easy to maintain? If such a role exists, the overall contribution of meat to a healthy diet warrants re-examination.

To determine this possibility, we administered a survey to determine the extent to which a low-carb diet, in which the carbs were replaced with animal-derived foods, was viewed favorably by the public and the percentage of low-carb dieters who increase their consumption of meat, dairy and eggs when on the diet.

Thirty individuals took our survey in person at a store in Oklahoma City, Okla., and 355 individuals took the survey on the internet. The sample demographics were representative of the U.S. in terms of gender, ethnicity, age and body mass index.

First, consider general attitudes towards various diets. Respondents were asked to rate the overall effectiveness of nine weight-loss strategies (Figure 1). The results show that Americans are getting the message to consume fewer calories and eat more vegetables.

Of particular importance to the livestock industries is the fact that replacing some fatty foods with low-fat meat, dairy and/or eggs is seen as a more effective dieting regime than replacing fatty foods with carbs. Gone are the days when food processors can make food appear healthier by simply replacing fat with sugar.

Notice, also, that replacing fatty foods with low-fat meat, dairy and/or eggs is considered more effective than simply exercising more. Americans apparently see protein and other nutrients derived from livestock as a useful ally in the struggle for a healthy weight.

What happens when individuals actually adopt a low-carb diet? We asked respondents if they had successfully dieted or maintained a healthy weight in the last two years and, if they did, whether they had any personal experience with the low-carb diet (Table). Of the 385 individuals taking the survey, 322 indicated that they had lost weight or maintained a healthy weight in the last two years; most of them had experience with a low-carb diet, and those who did deemed it effective.

Those with personal experience on the low-carb diet were asked how they constituted their consumption of specific foods changed when they adopted the diet. The results are shown in Figure 2.

Low-carb diets clearly give pork, poultry and fruit a boost, along with yogurt and eggs. Among animal-derived food products, the impact on poultry consumption is especially large. For every person who consumes less poultry when implementing a low-carb diet, four to six people eat more poultry. More people reported reducing their consumption of beef and pork, although the reductions were not as intense as the increase in poultry, suggesting that people might consume more meat overall when on a low-carb diet.

Egg consumption rose slightly for both genders. Only in the category of milk did males and females really diverge. Males consume more milk when on a low-carb diet, while females consume less.

So, to sum it up, low-carb diets are seen as one among other successful dieting techniques and are considered effective by those who use them. Males and females on a low-carb diet both display similar behaviors. They greatly increase their consumption of poultry, vegetables and fruits while greatly reducing their consumption of added sugars.

*F. Bailey Norwood, Brianna Domnick, Katie Smithson and Jody Campiche are currently or formerly affiliated with the Department of Agricultural Economics at Oklahoma State University. Comments or questions can be sent to Norwood at bailey.norwood@okstate.edu.

---

1. To what extent do you agree or disagree with these statements?
   (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree)
   “One can lose weight and/or maintain a healthy weight”...

2. When you are on a low-carb diet, how does your consumption of the following foods change?

---

Experience with weight-loss strategies

Which of these strategies have been most effective for you in losing weight and/or maintaining a healthy weight?

Note: Responses of 322 subjects who have lost weight or maintained a healthy weight in the last two years.

Source: Oklahoma State University.

---

*Continued page 41