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J Hum Lact 2004; 20; 340

DOI: 10.1177/089033440402000311

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A Publication of the International
Lactation Consultant Association



Weight Loss During Lactation: Are Low-Carbohydrate Diets a Good Choice?

By Katherine Doberne, BS, Adrienne Heinig, Kara Ishii, MSW, and Jane Heinig, PhD, IBCLC

You brought your beautiful baby home a few months ago, but you also brought home 15 extra pounds that just won't go away. While searching for ways to lose the weight, you find many ads for low-carbohydrate diets in magazines and on television. A friend tells you to try a low-carbohydrate diet. She thinks it will work quickly and you'll never feel hungry. Now you are wondering if a low-carbohydrate diet is healthy for a new mother, and how it may affect you or your baby. Read on for the latest information.

Importance of Reaching and Maintaining a Healthy Weight

First of all, keep in mind that a healthy weight doesn't mean looking like women you see on television and in magazine ads. Ask your doctor what weight is healthy for you, because maintaining a healthy weight is one of the most important things you can do for yourself. Here are only a few reasons why.

At a healthy weight—

- You'll feel better and have more energy to tackle the task of being a new mom.
- You'll reduce your risk for getting heart disease (the number 1 killer of women in the United States).
- You'll reduce your risk for developing diabetes.
- You'll reduce your risk for developing some forms of cancer.

If you keep your extra weight—

- You are more likely to be heavier as you grow older, which is bad for your health.
- You might gain even more weight if you have another baby.

- You'll have less energy to tackle the task of being a new mom!

Do Low-Carbohydrate Diets Work?

At first, people on low-carbohydrate diets lose more weight than people on low-fat diets. But over the long term (12 months), there is *no difference* in weight loss with different diets. The type of diet is not as important as how long and how well you stick to it.

Are Low-Carbohydrate Diets Safe for Breastfeeding Women?

Your brain needs carbohydrates for energy. When you eat very few carbohydrates, your body

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breaks down fats for energy instead; this creates products called “ketone bodies,” which are used for part of the energy your brain needs. *But*, having a lot of ketone bodies in your blood changes your metabolism (the way your body uses nutrients). Doctors simply don’t know how this might affect your health or your breast milk. So authors of the most popular diet books **do not** recommend that breastfeeding women eat very low amounts of carbohydrates. Also, low-carbohydrate foods are often low in important nutrients you need, such as fiber, folate, or vitamin C. Finally, the diets may also change your mood, making you tense, tired, or angry. This is not good for your *or* your baby!

Can Low-Carbohydrate Diets Affect your Milk Supply?

Carbohydrates are needed to make the lactose in milk, so it is possible that being on a low-carbohydrate diet might reduce your milk supply. Cows that have a lot of ketone bodies in their blood make less milk than other cows, but no one has studied if low-carbohydrate diets affect milk supply in women. However, ketone bodies get into milk and may change the taste and smell of your milk. This might make your baby less likely to want to breastfeed, and the less your baby breastfeeds, the lower your milk supply becomes.

Healthy Ways to Lose Weight

- Reduce fat in your diet. That way, you can eat the same amount of food and still lose weight. Fat has more than twice the calories as the same amount of carbohydrates or protein.
- Eat foods that are high in fiber, like fruits, vegetables, beans and whole grains (these can also help you feel satisfied).
- Always drink plenty of water (or other low-calorie, *non-caffeinated* drinks).
- Don’t restrict yourself too much. You should eat at least 1800 calories each day. A safe rate of weight loss is about 1-2 lbs per week.
- And overall, eat a healthy diet and get regular exercise.

Remember—

- Don’t be fooled by promises of quick, easy weight loss. Such weight loss is unsafe!
- If you do decide to go on a diet, check with your doctor and be sure to get regular checkups.
- Different diets work for different people. What worked for your friend might not work for you.

Weight Loss: How it Works

Most of us maintain our weight by *using* the same number of calories we eat. That is, if we eat more calories than we use, we *gain* weight, and if we eat fewer calories than we use, we *lose* weight. Our body uses calories for many activities, including keeping our bodies at a constant temperature and keeping blood flowing, and even in digesting food! In the case of lactation, calories are also needed (about 500 calories) to make milk for the baby.

So, to lose weight, a person must either (a) eat fewer calories or (b) use more energy. So you can either eat less or be more active (exercise more, take the stairs, and so on). The difficulty of weight loss comes in actually doing it. It can be difficult to eat less food, exercise more, and not constantly feel hungry. That’s why we’ve provided the healthy tips above. For more information on losing weight the healthy way, talk to your doctor.