

By Carol T. Culhane, PHEc, MBA

☀ What was old is new again

The use of a low-carb diet as a weight reduction tool is not 'new'. It emerged in the '70's when low-carbohydrate intake was embraced from an entrepreneurial perspective rather than solely as a medical concern of nutrient deficiency. Whilst nutrition and dietetic students were learning the scientifically documented physiological effects of carbohydrate deprivation, in which the body will burn stored body fat in response to changes in metabolism, other observers recognized the marketplace value of this regime in an overweight society.

☀ Villain or Victim?

Every moment in time over the past 30 years, one particular food ingredient appears to be unduly isolated and held responsible for a large proportion of diet-related maladies. The portrayal of carbohydrate as a villain has been known since the mid-'90's. A 1999 National Institute of Nutrition publication The Role of Grains in the Canadian Diet reported "*The popular pursuit of low carbohydrate diets in the belief that high carbohydrate leads to obesity is not supported by the scientific evidence.*" "Popular pursuit" is the description. How would the author categorize what we are witnessing today? As many nutritionists are trying to convey, carbohydrate has become victimized - again.

☀ Sticking Power of Low-Carb Niche

The US low-carb food sector has rapidly grown to an estimated US\$12B, a value coincidentally equal to the US organic food market. IFFL forecasts a low-carb niche which is here to stay, despite its quick rise in popularity, for several reasons. Specifically, it has been in existence, though smaller, since the 1970's. Further, while controversial, a genuine low-carb diet will reduce body fat, and therefore, weight.

☀ Distinctions with a Difference

1. Low-Carb Food & Low-Carb Diets

Not everyone consuming a low-carb food (diet soft drinks, fruit-first preserves) is on or even contemplating a low-carb diet. The reported percentage of consumers choosing low-carb food is not an indicator of low-carb diet prevalence.

2. Scientific-basis & Wholesome

Unlike other fad diets, which have a dubious or no scientific basis, a low-carb diet does have a scientific foundation. The physiological mechanism induced in the body through severe carbohydrate restriction is a well-known fact in nutrition science circles. However, this scientific basis is not synonymous with healthy or wholesome.

3. Weight Loss & Weight Management

Restrictive low-carb diets will result in weight loss. They have not been shown to be effective in managing weight over an extended period of time, or in correcting the eating patterns that lead to the excess body weight.

4. Consumers & Consumer Loyalty

Difficulty adhering to the diet for more than a few months at a time has been widely reported. IFFL estimates that 5-6% of the North American adult population will be on a low-carb diet at any point in time. In a constant state of ebb and tide, either the same consumer will enter the sector then exit once the desired results are achieved, or, a new stream of entrants will be continually try the regime. **FF**

☀ Some Websites

<http://www.mintel.com/> (For market reports)
www.carbaware.org (Low-carb Interest Group)

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