

5 Most Common Low-Carb Mistakes (And How to Avoid Them)

By [Kris Gunnars, BSc](#) |

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A few months ago, I read a book called *The Art and Science of Low-Carbohydrate Living*.

The authors are two of the world's leading researchers on low-carb diets.

Dr. Jeff S. Volek is a Registered Dietitian and Dr. Stephen D. Phinney is a medical doctor.

These guys have performed many [studies](#) and have treated **thousands** of patients with a low-carb diet.

According to them, there are many stumbling blocks that people tend to run into, which can lead to adverse effects and suboptimal results.

To get into full-blown ketosis and reap all the metabolic benefits of low-carb, merely cutting back on the carbs isn't enough.

If you haven't gotten the results you expected on a [low-carb diet](#), then perhaps you were doing one of these 5 common mistakes.

1. Eating Too Many Carbs

There is no clear definition of exactly what constitutes a "low carb diet."

Some would call anything under 100-150 grams per day low-carb, which is definitely a lot less than the standard Western diet.

A lot of people could get awesome results within this carbohydrate range, as long as they ate real, unprocessed foods.

But if you want to get into [ketosis](#), with plenty of ketones flooding your bloodstream to supply your brain with an efficient source of energy, then this level of intake may be excessive.

It could take some self experimentation to figure out your optimal range as this depends on a lot of things, but most people will need to go under 50 grams per day to get into full-blown ketosis.

This doesn't leave you with many carb options except vegetables and small amounts of berries.

Bottom Line: If you want to get into ketosis and reap the full metabolic benefits of low-carb, going under 50 grams of carbs per day may be required.

2. Eating Too Much Protein

Protein is a very important macronutrient, which most people aren't getting enough of.

It can improve satiety and increase fat burning compared to other macronutrients [\(1\)](#).

Generally speaking, more protein should lead to [weight loss](#) and improved body composition.

However, low-carb dieters who eat a lot of lean [animal foods](#) can end up eating too much of it.

When you eat more protein than your body needs, some of the amino acids in the protein will be turned into glucose via a process called [gluconeogenesis](#) (2). This can become a problem on very low-carb, ketogenic diets and prevent your body from going into full-blown ketosis.

According to Volek and Phinney, a “well-formulated” low-carb diet should be low-carb, high-fat and **moderate** protein.

A good range to aim for is 1.5 – 2.0 grams per kilogram of bodyweight, or 0.7 – 0.9 grams per pound.

Bottom Line: Protein can be turned into glucose via a process called gluconeogenesis and excessive protein consumption can prevent you from getting into ketosis.

3. Being Afraid of Eating Fat

Most people get the majority of their calories from dietary carbohydrates, especially sugars and grains.

When you remove this energy source from the diet, you must replace it with something or you will starve.

Unfortunately, some people believe that because low-carb is a good idea, then low-fat AND low-carb will be even better. This is a **big mistake**.

You need to get energy from somewhere and if you don't eat carbs, then you **MUST** add in fat to compensate. If you don't, you will get hungry, feel like crap and eventually give up on the plan.

There's no scientific reason to fear fat, as long as you choose healthy fats like monounsaturated, [saturated](#), and Omega-3s while keeping the [vegetable oils](#) to a minimum and eliminating trans fats.

Personally, my fat intake hovers comfortably around 50-60% of total calories when I strictly stick to a low-carb plan. According to Volek and Phinney, fat around 70% of total calories may be even better.

To get fat into this range, you must choose fatty cuts of meat and liberally add healthy fats like [butter](#), lard, [coconut](#) and olive oil to your meals.

Bottom Line: A very low-carb diet must be high in fat, otherwise you won't be getting enough energy to sustain yourself.

4. Not Replenishing Sodium

One of the main mechanisms behind low-carb diets is a [reduction in insulin](#) levels (3, 4).

Insulin has many functions in the body, such as telling fat cells to store fat.

But another thing that insulin does is to tell the kidneys to hold on to sodium (5).

On a low-carb diet, your insulin levels go down and your body starts shedding

excess sodium and water along with it. This is why people often get rid of excess bloat within a few days of low-carb eating.

However, sodium is a crucial electrolyte in the body and this can become problematic when the kidneys dump too much of it.

This is one of the main reasons people get side effects on low-carb diets... such as lightheadedness, fatigue, headaches and even constipation.

The best way to circumvent this issue is to add more sodium to your diet. You can do this by adding more salt to your foods, but if that doesn't suffice then you can drink a cup of broth every day.

I personally like adding a bouillon cube into a cup of hot water, then drinking it like a soup in a cup. It actually tastes really good and supplies 2 grams of sodium.

Bottom Line: Low-carb diets lower insulin levels, which makes the kidneys excrete excess sodium from the body. This can lead to a mild sodium deficiency.

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5. Not Being Patient

Your body is designed to preferentially burn carbs, if they are available. So if they're always available, that's what your body chooses to use for energy.

If you drastically cut back on carbohydrates, the body needs to shift to the other energy source... fat, which either comes from your diet or your body fat stores.

It can take a few days for the [body to adapt](#) to burning primarily fat instead of carbs, during which you will probably feel a little under the weather.

This is called the “low carb flu” and happens to most people. In my experience, this can take about 3-4 days, but **full adaptation** can take several weeks.

So it’s important to be patient and be strict on your diet in the beginning so that this metabolic adaptation can take place.

Bottom Line: It can take a few days to get past the “low-carb flu” stage and several weeks for full adaptation to a low-carb diet. It is important to be patient.

Take Home Message

I personally believe low-carb diets to be a potential cure for some of the world’s biggest health problems, including obesity and type II diabetes. This is well supported by science ([6](#), [7](#), [8](#)).

However, just cutting back on carbs [isn’t enough](#) to get optimal results.

Low-carb diets are very effective. That is a [scientific fact](#).

However, as with any diet, people sometimes stop losing before they reach their desired weight.

Top 15 Reasons You Are Not Losing Weight on a Low-Carb Diet

Here are the top 15 reasons why you’re not losing weight on a low-carb diet.

By [Kris Gunnars, BSc](#) |

March, 2016

<https://authoritynutrition.com/15-reasons-not-losing-weight-on-a-low-carb-diet/>

1. You Are Losing Fat, You Just Don’t Realize it

Weight loss isn’t a linear process.

If you weigh yourself every day, then there will be days where the scale goes down, other days where it goes up.

It doesn’t mean that the diet isn’t working, as long as the general trend is going downwards.

Many people [lose a lot of weight](#) in the first week of low-carbing, but it is mostly water weight. Weight loss will slow down significantly after that initial phase.

Of course, losing **weight** is not the same as losing **fat**.

It is possible, especially if you’re new to weight lifting, that you are gaining muscle at the same time that you’re losing fat.

To make sure that you’re losing, use something other than just the scale (which is a big, fat liar). Use a measuring tape to measure your waist circumference and have your body fat percentage measured every month or so.

Also, take pictures. Take note of how your clothes fit. If you’re looking thinner and your clothes are looser, then you ARE losing **fat** no matter what the scale says.

Bottom Line: Weight loss isn’t linear and there’s a lot more to weight than just

body fat. Be patient and use other ways of measuring than just the scale.

2. You're Not Cutting Back on Carbohydrates Enough

Some people are more carb sensitive than others.

If you're [eating low-carb](#) and your weight starts to plateau, then you may want to cut back on carbs even further.

In that case, go under 50 grams of carbs per day.

When you go under 50 grams per day then you're going to have to eliminate most fruits from your diet, although you can have berries in small amounts.

If that doesn't work either, going under 20 grams temporarily can work... eating just protein, [healthy fats](#) and leafy green vegetables.

To make sure that you're **really** eating low-carb, create a free account on [Fitday](#) and log your food intake for a while.

Bottom Line: If you are carb sensitive, then you may want to temporarily eliminate fruits and eat less than 50 grams of carbs per day.

3. You're Stressed All The Time

Unfortunately, it isn't always enough to just [eat healthy](#) and exercise.

We need to make sure that our bodies are functioning optimally and that our hormonal environment is favorable.

Being stressed all the time keeps the body in a constant state of "fight or flight" – with elevated levels of stress hormones like [cortisol](#).

Having chronically elevated cortisol levels can increase your hunger and cravings for [unhealthy foods](#) ([1](#), [2](#)).

If you want to cut back on stress, try meditation and deep breathing exercises.

Cut back on distractions like [Facebook](#) and news media, read more books instead.

Bottom Line: Chronic stress can have negative effects on your hormonal environment, making you hungrier and preventing you from losing weight.

4. You're Not Eating Real Food

A low-carb diet is about more than just lowering your intake of carbs.

You have to replace those carbohydrates with real, nutritious foods.

Throw away all processed low-carb products like Atkins bars, they are not real food and they are NOT good for your health.

Stick to meats, fish, [eggs](#), vegetables and healthy fats if you need to lose weight.

Also, "treats" like paleo cookies and brownies can cause problems even though they're made with healthy ingredients. They should be considered as occasional treats, not something you eat every day.

What is also important is to eat enough FAT. If you try to cut back on carbs AND fat, you will end up ravenously hungry and feel like crap.

Eating a diet with nothing but protein is a very bad idea. Low-carb, high-fat and **moderate** protein is the way to go if you want to get [into ketosis](#), which is the optimal hormonal environment to burn body fat.

Bottom Line: You need to replace the carbs with real, nutritious foods. To lose weight, stick to meats, fish, eggs, healthy fats and vegetables.

5. You're Eating Too Many Nuts

Nuts are real foods, no doubt about that.

They are also very high in fat, almonds for example having about 70% of calories as fat.

However, nuts are **very easy** to overeat on.

Their crunchiness and high energy density give us the ability to eat large amounts of them without feeling full.

I personally can eat a bag of nuts and still not feel satisfied, even though that one bag contains more calories than a meal.

If you're snacking on nuts every day (or worse, nut butters) then chances are that you're just eating way too many calories.

Bottom Line: Nuts have a very high energy density and are easy to overeat on. If you're constantly snacking on nuts, try eliminating them.

6. You're Not Sleeping Enough

Sleep is incredibly important for overall health and studies show that a lack of sleep correlates with weight gain and obesity ([3](#), [4](#)).

A lack of sleep can make us [feel hungrier](#) ([5](#)). It will also make us tired and less motivated to exercise and eat healthy.

Sleep is one of the pillars of health. If you're doing everything right but still not getting proper sleep, then you won't see anywhere near the results you might expect.

If you have a sleeping disorder, see a doctor. They are often easily treatable.

Some tips to improve sleep:

- Avoid [caffeine](#) after 2pm.

- Sleep in complete darkness.

- Avoid alcohol and physical exercise in the last few hours before sleep.

- Do something relaxing before sleep, like reading.

- Try to go to bed at a similar time each night.

Bottom Line: Sleep is absolutely crucial for optimal health. Studies show that a lack of sleep can make you eat more and gain weight.

7. You're Eating Too Much Dairy

Another low-carb food that can cause problems for some people is dairy.

Some dairy products, despite being low in carbs, are still pretty high in protein.

Protein, like carbs, can raise insulin levels, which drives energy into storage.

The amino acid composition in dairy protein makes it [very potent](#) at spiking insulin. In fact, dairy proteins can spike insulin as much as white bread ([6](#), [7](#)). Even though you may seem to tolerate dairy products just fine, eating them often and spiking insulin can be detrimental to the metabolic adaptation that needs to take place in order to reap the full benefits of low-carb diets. In this case, avoid milk, cut back on the cheese, yogurt and cream. Butter is fine as it is very low in protein and lactose and therefore won't spike insulin.

Bottom Line: The amino acid composition in dairy proteins make them spike insulin fairly effectively. Try eliminating all dairy except butter.

8. You're Not Exercising Right (or at all)

You should NOT exercise with the goal of burning calories.

The calories burned during exercise are usually insignificant, they can easily be negated by eating a few extra bites of food at the next meal.

However, exercise is **critical** for both physical and mental health.

Exercise, in the long run, can help you lose weight by improving your metabolic health, increasing your muscle mass and making you feel awesome.

But it's important to do the right kind of exercise. Nothing but cardio on the treadmill is unlikely to give you good results and doing too much may even be detrimental.

Weight lifting – this will greatly improve your hormonal environment and increase your muscle mass, which will help you lose weight over the long term.

Interval training – doing high intensity intervals is an excellent form of cardio that improves your metabolism and raises your levels of human growth hormone.

Low intensity – being active and doing some low-intensity work like walking is a great idea. The human body was designed to move around, not sit in a chair all day.

Bottom Line: The right kinds of exercise improve your hormonal environment, increase your muscle mass and make you feel awesome.

9. You're Eating Too Many Sweeteners

Despite some sweeteners having no calories, they *can* affect our appetite levels. Several studies show that artificial sweeteners can affect appetite, either negatively or positively, in some cases making people eat more overall calories ([8](#), [9](#)).

Additionally, consumption of artificial sweeteners is associated with weight gain in the long term ([10](#), [11](#)).

This probably depends on the individual, but if you're eating a lot of sweeteners and aren't losing weight then you may want to try removing them.

Bottom Line: Despite being calorie free, artificial sweeteners can affect our appetite, in some cases leading to a net increase in overall calories.

10. You Have a Medical Condition Getting in Your Way

There are [certain medications](#) that are known to stimulate weight gain. If you look at the list of side effects for the medications you are taking and see “weight gain” on the list – then make an appointment with your doctor. Perhaps there is another drug available that doesn’t cause weight gain. If you’re doing everything right and still aren’t getting results, then perhaps you have some underlying medical problem. Many hormonal disorders can cause problems losing weight, particularly [hypothyroidism](#). In that case, make an appointment with your [doctor](#). Explain that you’re having problems losing weight and that you want to rule out any medical issues.

Bottom Line: Certain medical issues and medications can cause weight problems. See a doctor to discuss your options.

11. You’re Always Eating

It is a [persistent myth](#) in health and fitness circles that everyone should be eating many, small meals throughout the day. This has actually been studied thoroughly. **No advantage** has been found to eating more frequent and smaller meals ([12](#), [13](#)). It is natural for humans to eat fewer meals per day and sometimes go long time periods without food. Some people do something called [intermittent fasting](#), eating in an 8 hour window each day or doing 24 hour fasts 1-2 times per week. This can be very useful to break through a plateau.

Bottom Line: There is no proven benefit to eating many small meals throughout the day. Try eating fewer meals and consider giving intermittent fasting a shot.

12. You’re Cheating Too Often

For people who are able to control themselves, having cheat meals or days every now and then may be fine. For others, especially those who are prone to food addiction, having [cheat meals](#) is likely to do more harm than good. If you’re cheating often... either with “small cheats” here and there or entire days where you eat nothing but junk food, then it can easily ruin your progress. Having more than 1-2 cheat meals per week (or one cheat day) is going to be excessive. If you just can’t seem to control yourself around unhealthy foods no matter what you try, then perhaps you have [food addiction](#). In that case, completely removing the junk foods from your life is probably a good idea.

Bottom Line: Some people can eat junk food from time to time without ruining

their progress, but that doesn't apply to everyone. For others, cheat meals will do more harm than good.

13. You're Eating Too Many Calories

At the end of the day, calories do matter.

One of the main reasons low-carb diets are so effective is that they reduce appetite and make people eat less overall calories without trying.

If you're not losing weight but are doing all the right things, then try counting calories for a while.

Again, create a free account on [Fitday](#) and track your intake for a few days.

Aim for a deficit of 500 calories per day, which *theoretically* should make you lose 1 pound of weight per week (doesn't always work in practice).

Bottom Line: It is possible to eat so many calories that you stop losing weight. Try counting calories and aim for a 500 cal/day deficit for a while.

14. You Don't Have Realistic Expectations

At the end of the day, weight loss takes time.

It is a marathon, not a race.

Losing 1-2 pounds per week is a realistic goal.

Some people will lose weight faster than that, others slower.

But it's also important to keep in mind that not everyone can look like a fitness model.

At some point, you will reach a healthy [set point](#) weight, which may be above what you initially hoped for.

Bottom Line: It is important to have realistic expectations. Weight loss takes a long time and not everyone can look like a fitness model.

15. You've Been "Cutting" For Too Long

I don't think it's a good idea to be in a calorie deficit for too long at a time.

The leanest people on earth (bodybuilders and fitness models) never do this. They do cycles of "bulking" and "cutting."

If you eat at a calorie deficit for many months (or years) then eventually your metabolic rate may slow down.

If you've been dieting for a long time, then a two month period where you aim to "maintain" and gain a bit of muscle may be what you need to get things started again.

Of course, this doesn't mean eating bad foods, just **more** of the [good stuff](#).

After these two months are over, you can start "dieting" again.