

# Protein:

## Pros and cons

By Christian Toto  
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**D**istrict resident Jennifer Sebeny believes the low-carbohydrate Atkins diet can be a great "jump-start" to weight loss. Over time, she has shed enough pounds to prove it.

However, dieting experience also has taught the 34-year-old that all-protein diets eventually slow down her active lifestyle.

"When you're working out, you're so active," says Ms. Sebeny,

who works out with physical trainer Yaz Boyum, a District-based bodybuilder. "You do need some kind of carbohydrate for energy."

Carbohydrates come in short supply with many protein-rich diet plans, including the widely popular Atkins diet. Yet carbohydrates provide the fuel needed for that extended treadmill session.

Ms. Sebeny sticks to a different dieting principle these days, cutting "white" foods, including sugar and processed flour, from her diet.

"That's not to say I'd drop an apple [from my diet]," she says. "You're not gonna gain weight from eating an apple or eating oatmeal."

Cedric Bryant, chief exercise physiologist with the San Diego-based American Council on Exercise, says

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Activity  
level is  
important  
factor

Jack Hornady/The Washington Times



Jack Horne/The Washington Times

## PROTEIN

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San Diego-based American Council on Exercise, says Atkins-type diets may not be the best dieting option for the person on the go.

"By limiting the carbohydrate intake, you reduce your muscle glycogen levels, which is how your body stores glucose," says Mr. Bryant, whose nonprofit group promotes the benefits of exercise. "When they're low, you'll have a reduced endurance capacity."

Reaction times also suffer with depressed glucose levels, he says.

"People on this diet might feel a little sluggish," he says, adding that the high-protein diet also increases the level of ketones in the blood, which depresses the central nervous system.

The way the diet forces a person to metabolize protein also could cause some electrolyte depletion, which the body sweats out during exercise and which needs to be replenished.

That doesn't mean protein-rich diet plans are without merit.

"The diet can be quite effective for many people who can commit to this eating style, but the way the media gets a hold of things . . . they look at it as the magic solution for everyone. For the person who is highly active, there are better options for them," Mr. Bryant says.

For some overweight people, the diet's appeal is obvious. They can lose weight without ever stepping on a stair climber or exercise mat.

"It's been my experience that the majority of people who have tried this diet . . . want to lose body weight, but not necessarily commit to vigorous exercise," he says.

That could change as all-protein diets grab the attention of more overweight Americans.

"With the increased attention it attracts, you'll have more and more people who do exercise who will try this diet," he says.

That doesn't bother Dr. Stuart L. Trager, chairman of the Atkins Physician Council and chief of hand surgery at the Pennsylvania Hospital in Philadelphia.

Dr. Trager says the Atkins diet allows recreational athletes to take in enough calories to train and recover.

"When people lose weight by controlling carbohydrates, they take in enough protein for muscle development and generation to allow for the training benefits to occur," Dr. Trager says. "If you restrict just your caloric intake, you'll lose fat and muscle."

Dr. Trager, an eight-time Ironman triathlete, says carbohydrates do provide energy, but the boost can be temporary.

"When you eat carbohydrates, you get a rapid rise in blood sugar, which stimulates insulin. It signals the body to lower the blood sugar level and store the extra calories in fat cells," he says.

The one caution Dr. Trager brings up is that those inactive people just starting the Atkins diet might let a few days pass before starting an exercise program. Dieters can feel a decrease in energy during the first few days of the diet, known as the "induction" period, when the body shifts gears to start burning fat as energy.

He also suggests that Atkins dieters who exercise regularly eat shortly after a workout — even food packed with those dreaded carbohydrates — up to the first hour after leaving the gym.

"It's a window of time after exercise where the body uses extra calories to refuel muscle glycogen stores," he says.

Fitness purists such as Bob Weinstein, a wellness coach based in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., say the Atkins diet isn't the kind of healthy,

permanent lifestyle change overweight people should use.

Protein loading is overrated from a fitness viewpoint, says Mr. Weinstein, a District native who gives fitness advice on Fox Sports Net.

"I don't think it's healthy to take in large quantities of protein; it means taking in the fat, too," he says. "That fat is saturated fat, which isn't as good for your body as plant fat."

Mr. Weinstein's clients occasionally ask about Atkins and other diet plans, but he steers them toward more traditionally balanced programs for better eating regimens.

Ms. Boyum, soon to be seen on her own fitness show on Montgomery County Cable TV, says some of her exercise clients made early gains by combining Atkins with pumping iron, but the results were short-lived.

"The extreme demand of a high-protein and no-carbohydrate diet is not sustainable," Ms. Boyum says.

"In the beginning, when the person omits carbohydrates, there's an immediate weight loss," she says. "It's encouraging for the individual and motivates them to continue, . . . but over time, you need carbohydrates for energy."

Her clients eventually become frustrated by the diet. "They would take a little sugar, and it would turn into eating more and more . . . a binge-type reaction. That was very common."

Ms. Sebeny defends the Atkins diet plan for giving context to how we approach what we eat.

"It does challenge you to figure out how many grams of carbohydrates to eat either to maintain or lose weight," Ms. Sebeny says.

"It challenges you to understand how your body metabolizes sugar," she says. "You do learn about the biochemical aspects of your body, but in the long run, you do need to come back to some balance."