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The Skinny on PROTEIN DIETS

BY JESSE McCURRY

Americans are more health-conscious than ever. According to specialists at the Mayo Clinic, we spend more than \$30 billion a year on strategies to trim, tuck and tone our bodies. Late-night television is flooded with quick-fix miracle foods, powders, shakes and even hypnotic-suggestion techniques to help us lose weight fast.

Despite Americans' desire to be thin, the national Health and Nutritional Examination Survey, due out this year, predicts the number of obese adults will increase from 27% to 34%. That's nearly one-third of our adult population. America is getting fatter.

Our dieting focus has been unsound, says Barry Sears, author of the *New York Times* best seller *The Zone*. "Researchers at the National Institutes of Health recently revealed that during the last seven years, while the dietary intake of saturated fats and cholesterol was decreasing, the average weight of young adult Americans has actually increased by 10 pounds (lb.)."

He adds, "Something is very wrong. If we are eating supposedly healthy diets that supply less fat and less cholesterol, why in the world are we gaining weight?"

■ A different approach

Many Angus breeders think they've found the answer. Abandoning traditional low-fat, high-carbohydrate diets, some are losing weight on programs that don't sound like diets at all. How are they doing it? Protein is back.

The concept is not a new one: Eat moderately more protein and fat, much fewer carbohydrates. Serious athletes and bodybuilders have long been high-protein proponents. Then in the 1970s, *The Complete Scarsdale Medical Diet* and *Dr. Atkins' Diet Revolution* hit the bookstores.

Protein diets, however, never became mainstream. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA's) Food Guide Pyramid, widely recognized and promoted as the most healthy "diet" by most of the medical community, remains the norm. Protein and fat sources are fixed near the top of the pyramid, and carbohydrates are the recommended base of healthy eating.

Some nutritionists are taking exception to conventional wisdom. Atkins is back, and other high-protein-diet books like *The Zone*, *Protein Power* by Michael and Mary Dan Eades, and *Sugar Busters!* by N. Leighton Steward are flying out of bookstores, turning the Food Guide Pyramid on its head.

These best-selling protein diets are as diverse as the American Angus Association's membership, yet they share some common themes: Eat fewer potatoes, pasta, bread, most fruits and sweets, and eat more meat, eggs, vegetables and nuts. The basic premise: Dietary fat doesn't make you fat; sugar-loaded carbohydrates do.

The advantages of protein diets, proponents claim, are numerous: less insulin secretion, which reduces the conversion of glucose and protein to fat; stable energy levels; less hunger; lower blood pressure; weight loss; and decreased risk of heart disease.

According to Sears in *The Zone*, carbohydrates recommended in USDA's healthy diet consist primarily of unfavorable carbohydrates like bread, pastas, rice and potatoes, which Sears and many of the high-protein-diet authors claim make us unhealthy.

"You'll remember that these carbohydrates are unfavorable because they have a high glycemic index and therefore a tendency to rapidly increase insulin levels," Sears says.

■ Feeling protein's power

"One day 477 heifers got into a cornfield, and it was about 90 degrees," says Dave Nichols of Nichols Farms in Iowa. "I thought I was gonna die that day, and I'm

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not being facetious. I passed out twice, and my feet were covered in mud — we had to get those heifers in or they would have shredded the field. I said to myself, ‘I’ve got to do something before I have to.’ I read that book [*Protein Power*] cover to cover that evening.”

Since then, using *Protein Power*, Nichols has taken 10 inches off his waist and has lost 77 lb.

“It’s been easy for me because I love salad

and nuts,” Nichols says. He typically eats eggs, grapefruit and half a slice of toast for breakfast; nuts or beef jerky as a snack; and salad, steak, chicken, pork or fish for lunch and dinner.

Nichols says the science of the diet makes sense.

“If you would take this diet to an animal nutritionist, they would say, ‘Wow. We knew that,’” Nichols says. “The authors of *Protein Power* calculated that pig rations mirror the

USDA Food Guide Pyramid.”

Nichols says he gets plenty of energy intake, and hunger is not a problem. “I feel a lot better and can hop into my 4-wheel pickup with one step,” he says.

Scott Johnson, the American Angus Association’s Angus Information Management Software (AIMS) director, heard about the Atkins diet, recently updated from its 1970s original, from a friend at the December 1997 California

The PROTEIN DIETS

Many protein diets are out there, and they vary significantly in how they claim weight loss. They all tend to encourage eating more protein and fat, while eating significantly fewer carbohydrates than are recommended by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA’s) Food Guide Pyramid.

“Good” foods tend to include meats, nuts, most vegetables and some fruits. “Bad” foods tend to include breads, pastas, caffeine, sweets, some vegetables, many fruits and potatoes. None of these diets rely solely on a high-protein, low-carbohydrate intake to achieve weight loss. Many also rely on aspirin, vitamin and mineral supplements, and exercise (naming only a few) to accomplish their goals.

Barry Sears, in writing *The Zone*, says exercise alone rarely overcomes the negative effects of high-carbohydrate diets. These diets also claim limiting carbohydrates controls insulin, the hormone the authors say makes you store fat.

Many Angus enthusiasts are following either *Dr. Atkins’ New Diet Revolution* by Robert Atkins or *Protein Power* by Michael and Mary Dan Eades. Other best sellers include *Sugar Busters!* by H. Leighton Steward and *The Zone*.

Dr. Atkins’ New Diet Revolution

The Atkins diet, originally published in the 1970s, was America’s first taste of a high-protein diet. Limiting carbohydrates to 20 grams (g)/day in the beginning phase (the equivalent of one slice of white bread), the diet claims a state of “ketosis” is induced, which suppresses appetite and automatically limits calories. There are no restrictions on fat intake. Indeed, you are encouraged to eat all the fat-rich foods you want, including cheese, bacon, cream and butter. The

advantages, Atkins claims, include weight loss, stable energy levels and lowered cholesterol. Of the best-selling protein-diet books on the shelves, this diet is the most drastic in terms of changing traditional low-fat, high-carbohydrate eating patterns.

Protein Power

This diet also claims a state of ketosis is induced that suppresses appetite. By limiting carbohydrates to 30 g/day, the dieter is instead encouraged to eat as much fish, poultry, red meat and low-fat cheese as desired. Dramatic weight loss is promised, as well as enhanced energy levels, lowering of “bad” cholesterol, elevating “good” cholesterol and decreasing risk of high blood pressure and heart disease.

Sugar Busters!

This diet claims that eliminating refined sugar and high-glycemic carbohydrates will allow you to enjoy steak, eggs, cheese and even wine — while you get healthy and lose weight. Refined sugars and other glucose-boosting foods, such as pasta, potatoes, corn and beer are off-limits. You’re also encouraged to exercise and to moderate intake of fat and lean meat.

The Zone

Taking exception to being called a high-protein diet at all, *The Zone*, a more moderate diet, claims it provides adequate protein, low total fat and moderate levels of low-density carbohydrates. Restrictions include grains, breads, pasta, rice, egg yolks and fatty red meats.

You’re allowed only so many “blocks” of protein per meal or snack, according to your size; the amount of carbohydrates and fat you can have depends on that. *The Zone* also relies on the insulin-control premise to permit weight loss and promotes a philosophy of looking at food as a drug that can affect our hormones. The diet claims it protects against heart disease, diabetes, premenstrual syndrome, depression and cancer, and it also promises to slow the aging process.

— Jesse McCurry

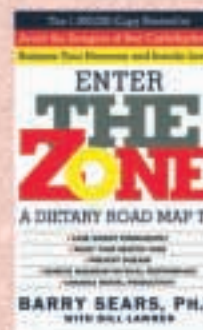
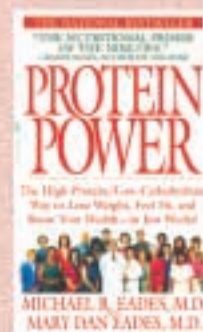
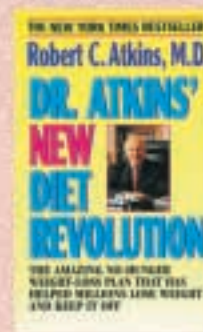




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Angus Days. He has since lost 30 lb.

“I had heart surgery in October of 1992 and gained a lot of weight after that,” he says. “The week before I started the diet, I had a blood test for an insurance policy. Four months into the diet I had another blood test, and my cholesterol had dropped 15 points and my triglycerides dropped 100.”

Johnson doesn’t even follow the diet word for word.

“I eat about the same amount of protein, just not as much sugars,” he says. “I’m probably eating less.”

Johnson eats some bread, but no potatoes or pasta. “I was a big candy eater,” he says. “Now I eat a lot more cheese.”

In fact, snacks around the Association office are changing a bit. “Dunkin’ Donuts is having a bad go in St. Joe,” says Dick Spader, executive vice president.

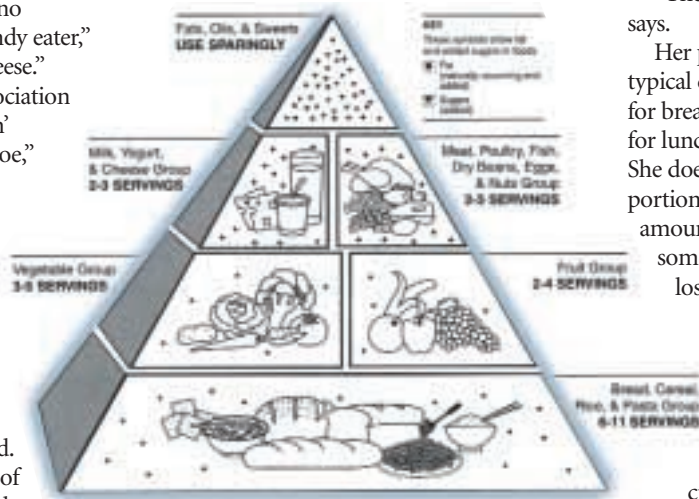
Spader and his wife, Sheri, have been on the *Protein Power* diet for almost a year. He says he has lost almost 15 lb.

“It’s been an interesting scenario,” he says. “You wake up one day and realize your consumption habits have changed. Now you’re feeding half of a loaf of bread to the dogs. It’s a real lifestyle change.”

Conventional dietary wisdom isn’t working, says Spader. “We have been forced a concept that cereal grains and roughage are the only ways to lose weight — a lot of people have found this isn’t a successful way to lose it.

“If you can make the lifestyle change by not exposing yourself to bread, potatoes and desserts, you can see pretty dramatic weight reduction,” he says.

Don Boggs, an Angus breeder and head of the Department of Animal and Range Science at South Dakota State University,



USDA's Recommended Food Guide Pyramid

has been on the Atkins diet since May 1998 and has lost more than 40 lb.

“On most diets you have to starve yourself out,” he says. “With this one, you don’t have to. You can eat more, just out of the right food groups.”

Boggs has cut out almost all starch and sugar intake. He says that, although the diet gets a little boring at times, he gets cravings only once in a while for some of his old favorites: orange juice and milk.

Boggs says he likes the Atkins diet because it is simple. “I looked at the other books, and they seemed more complex,” he explains.

Boggs encourages people interested in the diet to get one of the books and study it. “Don’t just go by what other people say,” he adds. “You have to adhere to the diet, or you could end up less healthy. Pick one and follow it.”

To be successful, you’ve got to be disciplined, says Boggs. “Just a bite does make a difference. You won’t enjoy the success you’d like to if you don’t follow the diet as printed.”

Galen Fink of Fink Genetic Systems in Manhattan, Kan., has been on the *Protein Power* diet since July 1998 and has lost almost 30 lb. “I’ve been on it fairly religiously and knew a few others who were on it,” he says. “It’s improved my blood pressure and triglycerides.”

Strictly limiting bread, pop and potatoes, Fink says he’s eating more eggs and meat, peanuts for snacks and enjoys eating more steak at his restaurant in Manhattan.

Bob and Becky Tiedeman, of Baldrige-Tiedeman Angus Cattle in North Platte, Neb., have been experimenting with the Atkins diet. Becky has been on the diet since February 1998.

“The result has been totally positive!” she says.

Her primary protein source is beef. On a typical day, Tiedeman eats eggs and bacon for breakfast; hamburger, beef soup or steak for lunch; and something similar for dinner. She doesn’t count calories or measure portions, trying only to eat reasonable amounts. Her doctor says any way to lose some weight is a good thing. So far she’s lost 45 lb.; her goal is to lose 50 more.

Tiedeman says she feels great. Although she has to limit her carbohydrates to 20 grams (g) or less per day and can’t eat pasta, bread or potatoes, she says she doesn’t have any carbohydrate cravings. “I eat all my favorite foods,” she says. “I lose just as much weight

when I eat beef as I do chicken and fish.”

Having tried Weight Watchers and Nutri-System with limited success, Tiedeman found the Atkins diet was the easiest. “You feel so good when you’re on it,” she says. “There’s no drudgery, and you look forward to eating foods you like.”

Tiedeman says she never has gained back more than 5 lb., even after taking breaks from the diet for a week or more.

“I’ve never been really off it for more than 10 days at a stretch,” she says. “And even then I find myself eating way more protein than carbs.”

The Tiedemans are so sold on the diet, they’re offering protein-diet special drinks at their new drive-thru coffee/cappuccino shop in North Platte.

“Some critics say this diet is not balanced,” Tiedeman says. “Well, if I die feeling this much better, what more can you ask?”

■ There are critics

Indeed, protein-intensive diets do have their critics. Most of the dietary establishment is still sold on traditional Food Guide Pyramid principles: Limit daily caloric intake of fat and protein to 15% each; while carbohydrates should make up the rest, around 70%.

Protein diets change those proportions to varying degrees, depending on which book you’re reading.

Dianna Schalles, director of nutrition services at Kansas State University’s Lafene Student Health Center, says Americans are gaining weight for different reasons.

“Just because there’s a lot of availability of nonfat or low-fat foods, doesn’t give you a license to eat all you want,” she says. “I see people at the student health center who abuse snack foods and fat-free potato chips, for example. Calories [are] what’s important. In our society, technological advances have us expending ourselves less, and if you’re eating too much for what you’re expending, you’re going to have health problems.”

Schalles advises students to stick with the Food Guide Pyramid, which she says is based on valid research, tested and true.

“In the case of protein diets, one study does not make it valid,” she says.

Kansas Beef Council Coordinator of Consumer Affairs and Nutrition Sue Holbert, who wrote an article in the January issue of *Kansas Stockman* critical of protein diets, says she doesn’t dispute the weight loss protein dieters are experiencing, but she



says there’s risk involved.

“If you are willing to stay on the diet the rest of your life, great,” she said. “But the percentage of those who are able and willing to do that is very low. The problem comes when people go off the diets. They go back to the way they were eating before, which was what got them obese to start with. And remember, those [who] lose weight typically gain all the weight back that they lost — plus more. There is scientific research that supports this.”

Holbert says the bottom line is that these diets are low in calories, which is ultimately the premise for any weight-loss diet regardless of the foods eaten.

“When a diet has primarily protein and fat, less is eaten and, in turn, fewer calories are consumed,” she says.

Holbert says overconsumption of food, in general, is the problem. “[*The Zone, Dr. Atkins’ New Diet Revolution, Protein Power and Sugar Busters!*] oversimplify medical terminology,” she says.

“Carbohydrates are our major fuel — if you overconsume them, it will be turned to fat. The same goes for protein and dietary fat.”

■ More to learn

Holbert says the long-term consequences of protein diets remain unclear.

“Depending on the protein source, the diet may be high in fat and calories, since fat contains twice the calories per gram as protein and carbohydrate,” she says. Cholesterol and saturated fat may be high, too, thus putting you at risk for heart

disease and arteriosclerosis (clogged arteries). High-protein diets also can put a strain on the liver and kidneys.

“These diets may also be missing nutrients from fruits, vegetables and grain products. In other words, the diet may lack certain vitamins and minerals, as well as complex carbohydrates and fiber. Certain cancers have

been linked to a diet lacking in fruits and vegetables.”

Mary Young, registered dietitian and director of nutrition research and information with the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association (NCBA), says NCBA’s nutrition department is starting to find research based on the protein diets.

NCBA is currently working with Baylor University on a pilot project to look at certain folks with some insulin resistance who are on higher protein diets. The research being conducted by NCBA is being funded through beef checkoff dollars.

“We support anything that sells beef within USDA’s dietary guidelines,” she says. “Everything we do and promote at NCBA is based on science.”

