In case you haven’t noticed, low-carb diets have become the rage. Suddenly, the low-carb “lifestyle” (whatever that means) is in. Fat is fine! Eat all the bacon and steak you want, but don’t touch that pasta!

Unless, of course, you bought low-carb pasta at one of those new low-carb food stores. Entire stores full of “carb alternatives” and “smart-carb” foods have arisen. And the number of diet books pushing variations of the low-carb diet is growing yearly. We have seen the enemy, and it is the carbohydrate.

But do people make healthy food choices by focusing solely on cutting carbs? I recently had lunch with a friend who is watching his weight. His order? “Double cheeseburger, hold the bun.” It makes no sense. A double cheeseburger is conservatively 1,000 kcal, whereas a single cheeseburger with a bun is perhaps 600.

Over the past three decades, before the low-carb craze, the data are pretty clear that we, as a population, gained weight. During this time, significant dietary changes occurred in both men and women:1

• The average caloric intake for men rose from 2,450 to 2,618 kcal/day. For women, it rose from 1,502 to 1,877 kcal/day.
• The percentage of calories from carbohydrates also increased by almost...
The scientific literature is not clear about the effect of low-carb diets. In a recent trial of a low-carb, high-protein, high-fat diet compared with a low-calorie, high-carb, low-fat diet, initial weight loss was greater on the low-carb diet, but by 1 year, there were no differences in weight loss between the two diet groups. In the Steno-2 trial investigating benefits of multifactorial risk reduction interventions in people with type 2 diabetes, the more aggressively treated group had significantly fewer cardiovascular events despite consuming a high-carb, low-fat diet over the 8 years of the study. Of course, the diet was only one of multiple interventions, but in the context of overall risk reduction for cardiovascular disease, it did not appear to have adverse effects. Parenthetically, in that study neither group lost significant weight. A recently published review of studies on low-carb diets found no advantage to these diets compared with isocaloric diets that contained carbohydrates.

Although the exact roles of dietary fat and carbohydrate as contributors to the current obesity epidemic aren’t clear, it is clear that the American diet contains excessive amounts of processed, high-fat, calorie-dense foods, such as those served in fast-food restaurants. It is also clear that our carbohydrate choices have favored the high-sugar, low-fiber varieties that are largely devoid of nutritional value.

There is no clear evidence to support severe restriction of dietary carbohydrate as promoting either long-term health or weight reduction. All carbohydrates are not the same. Choosing fiber-rich carbohydrates, such as fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, as well as foods low in saturated, and preferably high in monounsaturated, fats seems a sane course to follow. Choosing a double cheeseburger without the bun does not.

REFERENCES