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Michael Cala interviews nutrition expert and cancer-prevention specialist Moshe Shike, M.D. about whether low carb diets really work.Discovery Health: People trying to lose weight often say they've had limited or no success following the 20-20-60 diet. Consumer magazines praise the "high-protein low-carbohydrate" diet as a panacea for the American weight problem. Your views?Dr. Shike: These "high-protein, low-carbohydrate" diets have not been proven to be safe or effective in the long run. We know, for example, that high-protein diets may be harmful to the kidneys, and are associated with calcium loss, which can result in bone problems.Also, an extreme diet of any kind — say, one high in meats and whole-milk dairy products — may be harmful because high-fat diets have been associated with a number of chronic diseases, including cancer and heart disease. Also, when a whole class of foods is restricted, critical nutrients may be lacking from the diet.In a fat-rich, low-carbohydrate diet, the body switches to a form of metabolism that produces ketones. The presence of ketones in the blood system causes the blood to become acidic. Persistent acidity can lead to nausea, muscle breakdown, headaches, irritability, kidney problems and weak bones. Another problem with the low-carbohydrate diets is that they may be deficient in essential nutrients such as calcium, potassium and various vitamins.Discovery Health: A number of books on the market virtually guarantee weight loss simply by adjusting the percentages. "Raise the protein, lower the carbs," as it were.Dr. Shike: It's true that consuming high-protein or high-fat diets may initially induce weight loss in some people. But what has to be understood is that weight loss is based on calorie restriction — not on what is being consumed!Fad diets prohibit a lot of foods — in the case of high-protein diets, carbohydrate intake is severely restricted. And guess what? People lose weight not because of the altered food balance, but simply because they are restricting calories. Of course they will lose weight!Now, if you are going to restrict calories — which is vital to losing weight — isn't it better to restrict them in a way that is consistent with a healthy diet? Nobody needs excess protein and fat in their diets for the many health-related reasons we have already discussed.Although the potential negative effects that I mentioned earlier may take some time to become apparent, it is important to understand that the long-term safety of these fad diets has not been established.Discovery Health: But what about the fact that high-protein diets appear to reduce insulin requirements in diabetics? Isn't this a good thing?Dr. Shike: In the overweight person, increased insulin requirements are related primarily to excess body weight. People who are obese tend to develop an insensitivity to the natural insulin produced by the body — insulin resistance, as it's often called.When insulin resistance becomes severe enough, these individuals display high blood sugar levels and may require medications or supplementary insulin injections as a way to counter insulin resistance. They have developed non-insulin-dependent diabetes (NIDDM), or Type 2 diabetes.Once you reduce body weight to normal levels, insulin insensitivity decreases. The formerly obese person now becomes more responsive to naturally produced insulin. When that happens, he or she requires less supplemental insulin and may not even require insulin injections as long as normal body weight is maintained.Such individuals should still have their blood sugar monitored closely.Discovery Health: Is this also true for people who don't require insulin but might have "borderline" blood sugar irregularities?Dr. Shike: Losing excess weight can help prevent or delay the onset of diabetes. In people who routinely test high for blood sugars, losing weight frequently lowers it, and may even return blood glucose levels to the normal range. Overweight, non-insulin-dependent diabetics will also find the disease under much better control when they lose weight.Discovery Health: So, what you're saying is that high-fat and protein diets do work, but for reasons other than those that are claimed for them?Dr. Shike: Diets work to induce weight loss when they restrict calories. What I have just said about the health and weight-loss benefits of calorie restriction, and the direct relationship between obesity, insulin insensitivity and poor sugar metabolism is nothing new. It's not something that has been "discovered" in the past few years — it has been understood for decades. When it comes to cutting carbohydrates, it's not only pastries and bread you have to think about. Carbs are also in fruits (which explains their sweetness), so logic might suggest canceling this type of food, too — but don't."While many low-carb diets recommend avoiding fruit because it tends to be higher in carbohydrates due to its natural sugar, it's not ideal for health. Fruit contains many health-promoting nutrients, and removing them from the diet completely could be detrimental," explains Trista Best, a registered dietitian at Balance One Supplements, an online vitamin supplement shop based in Wilmington, Delaware. For example, fruit (as well as vegetables) provides heart-healthy dietary fiber, along with vitamins and minerals that the body uses as antioxidants to fight various chronic diseases, points out past research.So you know including fruit in your diet, even a low-carb one, is beneficial. But that doesn't mean that anything goes. A standard low-carb diet involves eating no more than 20 grams (g) to 100 g of net carbs per day, depending on your weight loss goals, according to Atkins.com.RELATED: Which Low-Carb Diet Is Best for People With Diabetes?Some fruits have a lower amount of net carbs than others, making them a better choice. (Net carbs are total carbs minus fiber and sugar alcohols, and are often counted in low-carb dieting, such as Atkins.) So to hit your weight loss goal, it helps to choose fruits with the lowest amount of carbs.Strawberries are a great fruit for anyone on a low-carb diet — but even if you prefer blackberries, blueberries, or raspberries, berries as a whole have little net carbs. So when eaten in moderation, they're a good choice for a sweet yet low-carb snack. Plus, berries are a nutritious choice. "Berries are not only low carb, they're a good source of antioxidants, vitamin C, and fiber," explains Megan Wong, a registered dietitian working with AlgaeCal, a company based in Vancouver, British Columbia, that provides free nutrition information, recipes, and exercises for bone health.According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), 1 cup of whole strawberries, for example, has 8.2 g of net carbs, 2.9 g of fiber (10 percent of the daily value, or DV), and about 85 milligrams (mg) of vitamin C (for 94 percent of the DV). For comparison's sake, a cup of raspberries has 6.7 g of net carbs, 8.0 g of fiber (29 percent of the DV), and 32.2 mg of vitamin C (36 percent of the DV).RELATED: There May Be Bugs in Your Strawberries: Should You Be Concerned?Oranges are another choice on a low-carb diet, with a small orange containing 9 g of net carbs, per the USDA. Oranges are a source of potassium, which can help lower blood pressure, explains Wong. In fact, past research found that increasing the intake of high-potassium foods may have the same positive effect on blood pressure as taking potassium supplements.Oranges also pack in a whopping amount of immune-boosting vitamin C, Wong says. The same small orange has 174 mg of potassium (3.7 percent of the DV) and 51 mg of vitamin C (57 percent of the DV).Some people put avocados in the vegetable category, but it's actually a fruit, notes Jenna Appel, RD, CDCES, who owns and operates Appel Nutrition Inc., a company based in South Florida that offers individualized and group nutrition counseling.If you're looking to keep your carb intake low, a California avocado has only 2.6 g of net carbs and a healthy dose of monounsaturated fats, according to the USDA. (That's just 1.3 g of net carbs per half of a fruit!) Monounsaturated fats may be helpful in lowering LDL ("bad") cholesterol, notes Appel.According to a randomized controlled trial published in February 2020 in the Journal of Nutrition, one avocado a day may help decrease LDL cholesterol in overweight and obese adults. "You can make a fresh guacamole, add avocado to egg dishes, or top toast with this low-carb fruit," suggests Appel.RELATED: The 10 Best Fruits to Eat on a Ketogenic Diet "Yes, olives are fruit, too, and they're a source of unsaturated fats, as well as iron and vitamin E," says Amanda Izquierdo, a Chicago-based registered dietitian and food and nutrition consultant. Healthier unsaturated fats, meaning monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fatty acids, can promote heart health and lower the risk of type 2 diabetes when they replace saturated fat, according to the Mayo Clinic.Per the USDA, a cup of whole olives contains 4.5 g of net carbs, 1.9 g of fatty acids, about 4.9 mg of iron (about 27 percent of the DV), and 2.4 mg of vitamin E (about 16 percent of the DV). "Since olives are cured, they're also high in salt, so it's a good idea to keep an eye on your portion size," warns Izquierdo.It's probably one of the sweetest fruits, so you might assume it's off-limits on a low-carb diet — but you can eat kiwi when following this approach, too!One kiwi with the skin on (for additional fiber) has 8 g of net carbs, 215 mg of potassium (about 5 percent of the DV), 24 mg of calcium (about 2 percent of the DV), and 64 mg of vitamin C (71 percent of the DV), says the USDA. "Kiwis are also loaded with vitamin C," says Shannon Leininger, a registered dietitian and diabetes care educator based in Las Vegas, Nevada.According to a past study, the antioxidants in kiwi may help support immune function, which can help lower the risk of the cold and flu. "They're great raw or even blended into a smoothie or homemade Popsicle," continues Leininger.RELATED: 10 Immune-Boosting Smoothie Recipes"Peaches are a great summertime fruit because they're so versatile — you can eat them raw, make them into a salad, or even throw them on the grill as a tasty side dish for your dinner," says Leininger.According to the USDA, one small peach contains 10.5 g of net carbs, 247 mg of potassium (5 percent of the DV), 21 micrograms (mcg) of vitamin A (2 percent of the DV), and almost 9 mg of vitamin C (10 percent of the DV).The phytochemicals (antioxidants) that give peaches their yellow/orange color help promote eye health, too, she says. More research is needed, but according to other past research, one to two servings of fresh peaches (and other fruits and vegetables high in these nutrients) were found to have a protective effect against glaucoma in older African American women. Lutein and zeaxanthin are two phytochemicals associated with eye health, as they promote healthy cells in the eyes and block harmful lightwaves, according to the American Optometric Association (AOA).One cup of cantaloupe has 11.3 g of net carbs, 57 mg of vitamin C (63 percent of the DV), 264 mcg of vitamin A (29 percent of the DV), and 417 mg of potassium (9 percent of the DV), per information provided by the USDA. According to a study published in June 2019 in Foods, the vitamin C in cantaloupe has several medicinal uses that may protect against disease — it has anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, and potential anticancer properties.If you're looking to cut carbs and increase hydration, watermelon is a fruit of choice, as it's highly hydrating, say Makayla Meikner, a Vail, Colorado-based registered dietitian with GreenChoice, an app that aims to help users buy the best food products for their health and the planet. According to the USDA, 1 cup of watermelon contains 139 g of water. "It's also particularly rich in a plant compound called lycopene, which is responsible for watermelon's red color and antioxidant properties," she says. According to a paper published in February 2019 in the International Journal of Food Properties, "watermelon has the highest bioavailable lycopene, about 60 percent more than a tomato." "Bioavailability" means that the substance is able to be absorbed in the body. The research states that lycopene can also reduce inflammation throughout the body, which might help lower the risk of certain cancers like breast, stomach, colon, and lung. Chronic inflammation can damage DNA and lead to cancer, warns the National Cancer Institute.One cup of watermelon contains 11 g of net carbs and 6,890 mcg of lycopene. It also has 170 mg of potassium (4 percent of the DV) and about 12 mg of vitamin C (13 percent of the DV), according to the USDA. RELATED: The Top 10 Hydrating FruitsOne cup of honeydew melon has 14 g of net carbs, per the USDA, and, like cantaloupe, it contains antioxidants to help protect against cell damage. Antioxidants in honeydew also include lutein and zeaxanthin. According to a past study, the lutein and zeaxanthin may offer protection against age-related macular degeneration, as it can protect against cell damage in the eyes.Honeydew is also a great source of vitamin C, with a cup containing 31 mg (34 percent of the DV). Vitamin C is a powerful antioxidant that can strengthen collagen, support immunity, and play a role in helping to prevent cancer, according to the National Institute of Health (NIH).Another option on a low-carb diet is grapefruit, with one small fruit containing 14 g of net carbs, according to the USDA. Grapefruit is also an excellent source of vitamin C, with 69 mg (76 percent of the DV). It also has 278 mg of potassium (6 percent of the DV).If you have high blood pressure, the potassium in grapefruit may help balance the amount of fluid and sodium in your body. This can help lower blood pressure, reducing your risk of stroke and heart disease, says the American Heart Association (AHA).As a caution, though, grapefruit can interfere with certain medications, warns the AHA. Talk with your doctor or pharmacist if you're taking drugs to treat high blood pressure or high cholesterol, relieve allergy symptoms, or prevent blood clots.RELATED: 4 Ways Grapefruit Can Boost Health and FlavorWith only 3.8 g of net carbs per fruit, according to the USDA, lemons are another fruit to add to your safe list. Whether you spritz lemon juice over a dish or add it to a glass of water, one lemon contains 80 mg of potassium (2 percent of the DV) and 31 mg of vitamin C (34 percent of the DV).

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