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Writer and self-proclaimed protorexic, Sarah Shephard, tries to go cold on the turkey, to find out if compensating too much protein for carbohydrates, does more harm than good. We're easy to spot once you know what to look for. We are the ones with plastic cups in our pockets, empty except for a pile of powder at the bottom. Our freezers are full of turkey mince and pre-portioned chicken breasts. Look at our desk mid-afternoon and chances are we'll be tucking into our second hard-boiled egg of the day, shaking one of those cups with a spare hand. It is the kind of eating regimen once associated with stacked bodybuilders and elite athletes. Neither do we. Although we have earned ourselves a more uncomfortable nickname: Protorexics - a freshly coined term to describe women who rely on huge amounts of protein, and a militant avoidance of carbohydrates, to control their weight and feed their workouts. But, people start asking, at what cost? We know where it started, of course. With a certain Dr. Atkins, the original carb swerver, in the decades that followed, a plethora of low-carb variants. From the Zone to South Beach to Paleo. All of which are based on the basic weight loss properties of high-protein foods: their complex makeup means they need more body energy to digest and metabolize. In addition, they contain the amino acids needed to create lean muscle tissue, which ultimately stimulates metabolism for faster fat burning. Fast-forward to the current fitness landscape and protein has found its home on every fit-foodie's Instagram feed (a quick search of the hashtag reveals more than 8.4 million results). In the food corridors, traditional carb-based products such as pasta and bread are 'enriched'. And every high-end gym worthy of its business membership comes with its own shakestand. Image Getty Images But why are the biggest fans ever on board the protein train, where there were once the biggest fans inhaling beefcakes? ----- It comes down to two main reasons, explains Nuffield Health nutritionist Jessica O'Dwyer. This generation of women has grown up with the message that, when it comes to losing weight, carbohydrates and fat should be avoided. So you're left with protein, which becomes the building block of every meal. ----- O'Dwyer's second reason ----- lies with the Strong Not Skinny movement. More women are engaged in strength training, rather than just traditional cardio, where there is a lot of conversation around refueling and rebuilding muscles with protein. Indeed, a recent survey for Bodybuilding Warehouse found more than half of gym-going women use protein to maximize the effectiveness of their training. READ: Why starchy carbohydrates help with weight loss at night? After joining the gym, my personal trainer asked if I had ever tried protein shakes. I was marking two-thirds of the way. Mark every circuit session and he reasoned that adding more protein to my diet was the easiest route to better stamina and leaning out of my body. He was right on both counts. At first I found that a shake post workout upped my stamina and annulled my hunger. So I started sipping in for breakfast and as I became more interested in how protein could fuel my workout - and the inevitable downside: how carbohydrates could be hampering my results - every meal was based around it. An inevitable part of the process was that carbohydrates were all but banned from my diet. I shrank from a size 14 to a size 10 within six months. Except the good times don't last forever. That's why, a few months ago, I ended up at the door of PT and sports nutritionist David Arnot, co-founder of Enhance Nutrition. I had hit a fitness plateau and had gone looking for answers - armed with what I had thought was my exemplary eating plan. But Arnot's verdict? ----- He had never seen anyone with my kind of exercise regime eat as few carbs as I did. ----- That was due to my lack of fitness gains. And he also pointed to a few other issues - my struggle to focus on work, and generally being so exhausted by the end of the day that I rarely have the energy or inclination to catch up with friends. He broke the statistics for me: by the time I flop into bed I've usually consumed more than 150g of the magic macro, which means I get by about 2.5g per kg of my body weight. According to Duane Mellor of the British Dietetic Association, that is far too much. ----- We recommend adults to eat about 0.75g per kg of body weight to get the necessary benefits of protein, including building muscle mass, helping the digestive system, regulating the input of nutrients into your cells and removing waste products. ----- Pros and cons of no carb diets Beyond the general concerns of too much protein that lead to high cholesterol and worsening kidney problems for those who are already suffering, most experts agree that eating too much protein usually leads to insufficiencies in other nutrients that are essential for health. It turns out that swapping carbohydrates for proteins can also lead to decreased natural fertility and a loss of bone density in active women. READ: 5 nutrition hacks for the super busy Experts also claim that it's not just how much protein you eat that may be the problem, the source of the surplus may be a bigger problem. Getty Images Most people increase their protein intake by increasing the amount of meat they eat, but this can even lead to weight gain because they eat high-calorie, highly processed meat proteins in too high a quantity, says O'Dwyer. ----- American weight loss surgeon and author of Proteinaholic, Proteinaholic, Garth Davis, claims that contrary to the popular theory of proteins as a weight loss winner, it is actually one of the biggest factors behind the international obesity epidemic and may be linked to chronic inflammation - a cause of diabetes, heart disease and cancer. There's a hard science to argue his case. A study published in Cell Metabolism found that individuals between 50 and 65 who ate a high protein diet (more than 20% of calories from protein) were, in the next 18 years, four times more likely to die from cancer or diabetes, and nearly twice as likely to die from a cause than those following a low-protein diet. No one denies how important protein is, says Arnot. But the message is misunderstood. Take protein shakes - they're a great way to refuel after a workout. But that's not because they're pure protein, it's because they're an ideal blend of protein and carbohydrates. And they should never be used only as a meal replacement. ----- Calories from protein are not used as efficiently for energy as calories from carbohydrates, because they cannot be oxidized quickly enough to meet the demands of intense exercise, he says. So the fixation on pre- and post-workout protein means that many women don't get the most out of their workouts. ----- Arnot decided to come up with a personal 10-day eating plan that I can follow, which promises to give me more focus, energy and nutrients without putting me in a calorie surplus. Meaning? More carbohydrates, less protein will equal more energy, not weight gain. I'll eat on that. READ: The nutritionist's guide to the healthiest supermarket carbs My Carb Challenge Getty Images Can I introduce carbs back into my diet without compromising my workouts or my weight? Let's see... My usual daily diet: 6.45am (pre-workout) Protein bar 9.30am (post-workout) Handful of pistachios 10.30am Boiled egg with smoked salmon and spinach 11.30am Half protein bar 12.30pm Lunch: can of tuna, beetroot, avocado, broccoli, brussels sprouts, kale, kale, drizzle balsamic vinegar 2.30pm Half protein bar 3.30pm Protein shake 4.30pm Greek yoghurt mixed with protein powder 6.15pm Half protein bar 7.30pm Dinner: Grilled salmon with stir-fried vegetables 10.15pm Greek yoghurt with half protein grater David Arnot's suggested daily diet: Breakfast: Porridge with semi-skimmed milk Snack: Apple, small handful of cashews Lunch: Chicken with ratatouille and rice (125g) Snack: Biltong or 1 protein bar Dinner: Red meat/fish with green vegetables and sweet potato Snack: Handful of muesli, yogurt pot, honey, berries and cinnamon My food diary ... Getty Images Day 1 After doing a 'carb shop' to stock up on non-protein products I haven't bought in years - oats, sweet potatoes, bread - I kick off my first day with porridge for breakfast. I'm eating it slowly. I love the taste. I don't like the fear that comes with it. Day 2 Two hours of strength training and I am Hungry by the time I'm done I can't help but shake a protein. Although Arnot has told me that a banana and peanut butter gives me the same post-workout benefits as a shake, I can't quite get my head around the fact that a carb fruit won't do any harm. I reach for the powder and the shaker instead. Day 3 I grab a packet of bagels in the supermarket, read the label, see a haze of carbs and put them back. Arnot has encouraged me to eat this kind of thing from time to time, so I understand that they are not the enemy. I can't. But later in the day, I realize I've only had one protein shake in three days. So, progress. Day 4 My regular cooked chicken is now overshadowed with roasted vegetables and a good portion of brown rice. I still eat a protein bar mid-afternoon and worry that snacks and carbohydrates equal weight gain. Day 5 I hit the gym for work and the difference is obvious as I power through the final round of my usual circuit without screaming for mercy or crumpling on the floor. I meet friends for a drink in the evening. They almost fall off their bar stools when I scoop up a handful of Bombay mix and shove it in my mouth. Day 6 Another day, another protein. I can't handle the habit. When I'm ready for bed, I check to see that my abs still exist. They're still there, which serves as a much-needed motivation boost. Day 7 Lunch is pasta, something that has been top of my banned list for almost two years. I can't blame the taste, but I feel a little bloated in the afternoon, which gives me the anxiety. Day 8 My carb-loving husband looks in awe as I devour an entire plate of shepherd's pie with sweet mashed potatoes and green vegetables, no doubt ecstatic not having to cook two different dinners for once. It feels good. It feels healthy and I don't experience any paranoia of weight gain knowing that I'm due to hit the gym tomorrow. Day 9 I wear a heart monitor to my circuits session to show how hard I train. It confirms that I have been working at a higher intensity than in recent months. The carbs impress. Day 10 Another strong day in the gym and I manage to deadlift more weight for more reps than I've ever done, even in the days when I first boosted my protein intake. I look at the scales for the last word - my weight hasn't changed an ounce. This content is created and maintained by a third party and imported onto this page to help users provide their email addresses. You may find more information about this and similar content on piano.io piano.io

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