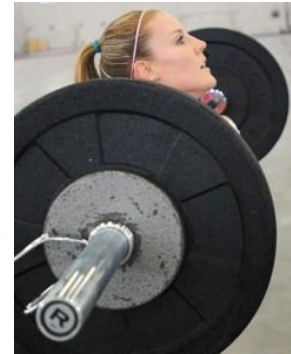


Is Your Low-Carb Diet Ruining Your Athletic Performance?

When I first started getting interested in **Paleolithic nutrition** close to a decade ago, the impression I got from reading ancestral health blogs was that many, if not most, Paleo dieters believed that a very low-carb diet was the optimal human diet. Some bloggers even went as far as to say that you could eat as much fat as you wanted as long as you restricted your carbohydrate intake, that insulin was the devil, that eating a strict ketogenic diet was the way to go for those seeking to increase their healthy lifespan, and that everyone, including those people who perform a lot of prolonged, high-intensity exercise, should severely restrict their carbohydrate intake and seek to become properly “fat adapted”.



So, naturally, I made a conscious attempt to lower my carbohydrate intake. To make up for this reduction I boosted my fat intake by adding more butter, olive oil, avocados, and other high-fat foods to my plate.

For a long time, I was getting upwards of 60% of my calories from fat; and since I was taking in fairly high levels of protein, my carb intake typically hovered around 15-20% (of total daily calories). At the time, this macronutrient ratio seemed to be fairly common among Paleo dieters; and within the low-carb community, many went even higher in fat...

Optimal carbohydrate intake and fat adaptation

As you know if you've been reading this blog for some time, my perspective on these things have changed quite a bit since I first started fiddling with the whole Paleo thing many years ago. I still advocate a diet that most people would describe as low-carb, as it contains much less carbohydrate than the typical Western diet. However, it's important to note that the carbohydrate intake I recommend (about 20-40% of total daily calories) actually could be classified as the evolutionary norm for our species, while the average carbohydrate intake in contemporary industrialized societies (about 45-60% of daily calories consumed) is – from an evolutionary perspective – absurdly high.

Getting grains (particularly the refined types), sugar-rich desserts, and highly processed foods out of the diet may be the single most important thing people can do to improve their health. However, that doesn't mean that going very low in carbohydrate is necessarily optimal, particularly for those who perform a lot of anaerobic exercise...

The average Joe who spends most of his waking hours in front of a computer and rarely exercises doesn't need a lot of carbohydrate. This person will do best on a Paleo-style diet that is fairly low in carbohydrate, particularly if he's insulin resistant and/or severely overweight. A bit of fruit here and there, some starchy tubers for dinner now and then, and the occasional treat are all the carbs he needs.

But what about those people who are very physically active? Personally, I've found that if I go very low carb, my exercise performance suffers. For a long time, I tried to support **my training** with a very low carb

diet (about 15-20% of total daily calories from carbohydrate), but I eventually had to realise that this approach didn't work for me.

That doesn't mean that a very low-carb diet never works for athletes though. It all depends on your genetics and current health condition, and even more importantly, what types of activities you perform. I do quite a bit of anaerobic training such as heavy strength training and sprinting, something that can be difficult to do optimally on a very low-carb diet – even if you spend weeks trying to get better and better at using fat as fuel. However, those who primarily perform light-moderate intensity aerobic exercise often do better on a high-fat diet, as long as they realise it's going to take some time to become good at burning fat.

Where should you get your carbs from?

One of the reasons the Paleo Diet is so healthy is that it excludes high-carb, highly insulinogenic foods. I certainly don't recommend that people who do a lot of strength training, sprinting, or other anaerobic activities should eat a lot of breakfast cereals, sugary desserts, and other foods that are very high in carbohydrate. *There is a better way...*

Fruits such as bananas and apples and “safe starches” like sweet potatoes, potatoes, and yams are the perfect source of carbohydrate for those who are physically active. Those who are very physically active may also benefit from including foods that have a higher carbohydrate density, such as white rice and quinoa.

When I first started boosting my intake of root vegetables and tubers (particularly sweet potatoes), my athletic performance improved noticeably. I was doing *okay* on a very low-carb Paleo diet, but *not great*. **It took a stack of sweet potatoes to really boost my performance.**

That's not to say that I binge on starchy foods – or recommend that anyone should eat a high-carb diet. All I'm saying is that if you're one of those people who've been duped into believing that the less carbohydrate you eat, the better of you are, then you should probably re-evaluate your perspective on things – particularly if you're very physically active.

Personally, I eat about 100-200 grams of carbohydrate each day, the exact amount depending on how physically active I am. This may not sound like a lot, but the fact is that to get 200 grams of carbohydrate, you have to eat a lot more fruits and vegetables than you would think.

I find that I “need” some starch to perform optimally in the gym, so I typically consume quite a bit of sweet potatoes every day. I'm also considering adding some quinoa into my diet, but as it's so damn expensive – and contains some potentially problematic anti-nutrients – I've put it on hold for now.