

# Consumer, Nutrition and Public Health Groups Warn Public About Health Risks Associated with Low-Carb Diets

## *New Coalition Also Calls for Government Action on "Low-Carb" Claims*

Washington, DC; June 22, 2004 -- With mounting evidence that the low-carb craze is leading many Americans to make unwise decisions about the amount and types of foods they eat, a new coalition of consumer, nutrition and public health groups today issued this stern warning: low-carb diets are unlikely to lead to sustained long term weight loss and they can increase the risk for a number of life-threatening medical conditions.

At a news conference in Washington, members of the newly formed Partnership for Essential Nutrition announced the findings of a comprehensive review of the scientific literature that will serve as the foundation for the activities and advocacy efforts of the coalition. Issued as a nationwide call to action, this review concludes that losing weight on these extreme low-carb diets can lead to such serious health problems as kidney stress, liver disorders and gout. These diets also increase the risk for coronary heart disease, diabetes, stroke and several types of cancer. Moreover, the coalition identified a number of short-term side effects from low-carbohydrate diets that although less serious, can affect a person's quality of life. These include severe constipation, gastrointestinal problems, nausea, repeated headaches, difficulty in concentrating and the loss of energy.

"low-carbohydrate diets conflict with decades of solid scientific research that clearly encourages us to reduce saturated fat and boost fruit, vegetable and fiber intake," said Barbara J. Moore, Ph.D., president and CEO of Shape Up America!, which founded the coalition. "Restricting carbohydrates stresses vital organs and alters brain metabolism while offering no advantages in terms of either fat loss or long-term weight control."

Comprising 11 leading non-profit consumer, nutrition and public health organizations, the members of the newly formed Partnership for Essential Nutrition are: Alliance for Aging Research, American Association of Diabetes Educators, American Institute for Cancer Research, American Obesity Association, National Consumers League, National Women's Health Resource Center, Pennington Biomedical Research Center, Shape Up America!, Society for Women's Health Research, University of California at Davis, and Yale-Griffin Prevention Research Center.

The coalition's review also questions the effectiveness of these extreme low-carbohydrate diets for sustained weight loss. Summarizing recent scientific studies that find the rapid weight loss associated with these diets is temporary and often results in weight "snap back," the coalition voiced apprehension about the processes by which people lose weight on these diets. Specifically, the new group questioned the safety of diets that force the body into "ketosis," a process that starves the brain of carbohydrates, forcing the metabolism of protein in the muscles followed by the metabolic breakdown of fat. Of key concern is that extreme low-carb diets produce dehydration, which can stress the kidneys and increase the potential for bone loss contributing to osteoporosis.

Besides raising these warnings, the Partnership for Essential Nutrition took aim at the proliferation of competing food and beverage products now labeled as "low-carb," "reduced carb," "carbohydrate free," "carb aware," "carb smart" and "carb countdown, none of which are regulated by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Citing new findings that consumers now spend an average of \$85 a month on these products, the coalition called on FDA to quickly issue an interim policy about the use of carbohydrate claims and then enforce it. Currently, both the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (ATTB) have issued interim guidelines for how manufacturers can make carbohydrate claims about meat and poultry products and alcoholic beverages respectively. These guidelines are meant as a stopgap measure and will likely change once FDA issues final rules.

## **New Survey Shows Consequences of Low-Carb Hype**

The coalition's actions come in response to new survey data showing that the explosive growth in the popularity of "low-carb" diets is affecting the American diet in unfortunate ways. Conducted by Opinion Research Corporation (ORC), this survey of 1,017 adult Americans reveals that:

- One in five (19 percent) adults who are trying to lose weight are doing so primarily by reducing the amount of carbohydrates they consume;
- Compared to other Americans trying to lose weight, many of those following low- carb diets are making poor dietary choices. Of special concern, 50 percent are increasing their consumption of steak, 30 percent are eating more bacon and 43 percent are consuming less fruit;
- The hype over low-carb foods is also affecting the rest of the population, many of whom are now consuming less fruits, vegetables, whole grains and low-fat dairy products. Compared to the five servings a day of fiber-rich fruits and vegetables recommended by the National Cancer Institute (NCI), the survey finds 68 percent now eat two or less servings of fruit a day and 63 percent consume two or less servings of vegetables. Moreover, 71 percent of the public consumes less than the three recommended daily servings of low-fat dairy products while 15 percent say they have cut out dairy products all together.

Compounding these findings, the survey reveals that many consumers are being misled into believing that extreme low-carb diets are healthy and that carbohydrates, not calories, are what contributes to weight gain and loss. According to the survey, 47 percent of Americans now believe that low-carb diets create weight loss without cutting calories, a view that the overwhelming number of credible scientific studies refutes. Equally troubling, only 21 percent of Americans know that low-carb diets are not recommended for people with diabetes, when in fact, the American Diabetes Association along with all the leading nutrition and public health groups recommend that for optimal health as well as weight loss, people should consume a diet that includes a variety of foods primarily composed of carbohydrates, and especially fruits, vegetables, whole grains and low-fat dairy products.

At the same time, the survey finds very limited understanding of the amount of carbohydrates needed each day for good health. Although the Institute of Medicine (part of the National Academy of Sciences) issued a recommendation that children and adults get a minimum of 130 grams of carbohydrate daily, only 19 percent of those surveyed knew this fact. Instead 51 percent believe that adults need significantly less, while 21 percent have no idea. Only 10 percent believe that adults need more.

### **New Initiative Focuses on Importance of Varied Diet Including Carbohydrates**

To guide weight-conscious consumers who may be tempted by the promises of low-carb diets, the Partnership for Essential Nutrition will use multiple information channels to reach the public with specific information about what carbohydrates are and what can happen when people don't get enough. The goal will be to raise awareness that carbohydrates contain essential nutrients that provide fuel for the brain and muscles, contain the fiber needed for proper gut function, help to control body weight and have been demonstrated through numerous scientific studies to lower the risk for certain cancers, stroke, heart disease and high blood pressure.

To drive home these messages, the coalition will convey solutions-oriented information, including a series of television and print public service advertisements and a new Web site -- [www.essentialnutrition.org](http://www.essentialnutrition.org). Of special significance is a new :30 television public service announcement that will air on television stations later this summer and fall. Produced by Marriner Marketing Communications of Columbia, Maryland, the spot tells consumers "Losing weight should make you healthier...Get there in a healthy way."

The Partnership for Essential Nutrition is a broad-based group of non-profit consumer, nutrition and public health organizations formed in 2004 to promote programs, policies and research that will advance public understanding about the essentials of a nutritionally balanced diet. Dedicated to providing guidance regarding the important contribution that all three macronutrients -- carbohydrates, protein and fat -- play in promoting good health and successful weight loss, the coalition was organized by Shape Up America!, which raised the funds to develop and implement this educational campaign.