

## Evaluating 4 Diets From A(tkins) to Z(one)

Trendy low-carb weight-loss plans, like the Atkins and Zone diets, have been duking it out for years, each claiming to be the best for weight loss. But a new study gives the Atkins Diet a leg up.

Experts have long voiced concerns that low-carb plans, especially the Atkins Diet, wreak havoc with blood cholesterol levels, because they are high in fat. But in the latest showdown of the weight-loss plans, the Atkins diet came out on top for both weight loss and effect on blood cholesterol levels.

**Diets vs. Diets.** In the study, researchers from Stanford University Medical School recruited 311 overweight and obese women, ages 25 to 50, randomly assigning them to follow one of four diets:

- **The Atkins Diet** group aimed for no more than 20 grams of carbohydrates a day for two to three months and no more than 50 grams a day after that.
- **The LEARN Diet** (Lifestyle, Exercise, Attitudes, Relationships and Nutrition) group followed a “prudent” diet of 55% to 60% calories from carbohydrates and less than 10% from saturated fat.
- **The Ornish Diet** group aimed to get

no more than 10% of calories from fat.

- **The Zone Diet** group followed a 40%-30%-30% (carbohydrate-protein-fat) distribution of calories.

**The Results Weigh In.** After following the plans for one year, the Atkins dieters lost the most weight—10 pounds; Zone dieters lost the least—3.5. But the biggest surprise was that the Atkins diet showed no unhealthy effects on blood cholesterol levels. In fact, high-density lipoprotein (HDLs or “good”) cholesterol actually increased and triglycerides decreased among Atkins dieters, both favorable responses.

**EN’s Take.** So, does this mean Atkins is the best way to lose weight? Not necessarily. There were no significant differences in weight loss among the Atkins, Ornish and LEARN diets (the Zone diet lagged behind all three). Moreover, the longer participants followed Atkins, the less effective it was; they lost more weight at the start, but began putting pounds back on as time passed. And the study didn’t look at men or older people.

Still, it does lay to rest fears that the Atkins Diet increases cardiovascular disease risk by raising cholesterol levels.

## Trans Fats Get Deadlier

New findings from the Nurses’ Health Study provide the strongest evidence yet for a deadly link between trans fats and heart disease. And reason to cut them out.

**Bad Blood.** In the study in the April 10th *Circulation*, researchers took blood samples from 166 women who developed coronary heart disease (CHD) and compared them to those of 327 healthy women. Those with the highest levels of trans fatty acids in their blood were three times more likely to develop CHD than those with the lowest levels.

Trans fats are not normally found in the human body, so trans in the blood is a direct reflection of trans in the diet. A high intake of trans was linked to higher levels of low-density lipoprotein (LDL or “bad”) cholesterol and lower levels of high-density lipoprotein (HDL or “good”) cholesterol. But this can’t explain all the CHD risk, suggesting trans fats may do other damage too.

**EN’s Advice.** Avoid trans fats by eliminating partially hydrogenated oils from your diet. Even foods labeled “zero trans” may have too much (they can contain up to 0.5 gram per serving). Just a few servings a day could put you in the high-risk zone.

## Research News

### New Study Finds Garlic Ineffective, But Don’t Give Up on It Yet

Garlic is a popular remedy for high blood cholesterol levels. However, the research on garlic’s effectiveness—both as a food and in supplements—is decidedly mixed. Now, a new study is out that put garlic to the test for six months, longer than most other studies.

The 169 participants, more than most studies, had moderately high low-density lipoprotein (LDL or “bad”) cholesterol. The study was designed to see which of four options lowered cholesterol the most: either of two garlic supplements (*Garlicin* or *Kyolic-100*), raw garlic or a placebo.

**Disappointing Results.** None of the garlic options—not the crushed raw garlic or either of the supplements—lowered LDLs more than the placebo. The researchers concluded that neither garlic supplements nor dietary garlic in reasonable doses is likely to reduce blood cholesterol levels. But that doesn’t mean garlic still might not help reduce your risk of cardiovascular disease.

**Not Over Till It’s Over.** Atherosclerosis (clogged arteries) involves a series of events that includes inflammation, high blood pressure, clumping of blood cells and constriction of arteries. Unchecked, it inexorably leads to a heart attack or stroke.

Although garlic now doesn’t appear to lower blood cholesterol, it’s possible—perhaps even likely, given findings from past studies—that garlic may play a role in preventing one or more of the other steps that contribute to atherosclerosis.

Population studies support a link between high garlic consumption and less progression of atherosclerosis. Moreover, garlic is known to thin blood much as aspirin does, reducing the likelihood that clots will form and contribute to plaque formation on artery walls.

**Raw vs. Cooked?** Most Americans get their garlic from food, not supplements. And most people eat garlic cooked, because few can stomach it raw. But

cooked garlic was not tested in this study. It’s known that heating destroys some of garlic’s allinase, the enzyme that activates alliin, one of the compounds in garlic believed to provide health benefits. And yet, recent research found that crushing raw garlic and letting it sit a few minutes before cooking can reduce the loss of healthful compounds. The cooking lesson here is to use crushed garlic instead of whole cloves.

**The Bottom Line.** Garlic supplements may be top sellers, but it now appears unlikely they can lower cholesterol levels. The jury is still out, however, on whether garlic might lower the risk of atherosclerosis some other way.

**EN’s advice?** Cook with garlic, but crush it and let it sit first. Consider garlic part of a balanced nutrition portfolio: By itself, it might not be powerful enough to reduce risk, but added to an already healthful diet, it just might increase your diet’s heart-healthy returns.

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