

The Tuesday Minute

Nutritional information.... one byte at a time

This Week's Topic

The “New” Belly Fat Diet... Why It Works

In case your patients should ask, let's take a look at a popular new diet that recently hit the market. The diet claims to target that “sometimes stubborn” weight right around the middle, the BELLY FAT. The recent book “The Flat Belly Diet” by the editors of Prevention Magazine has people talking about how to have a flat belly and it has people talking about MUFAs. MUFA is short for Mono-Unsaturated Fatty Acids the GOOD fats found in olive oil, nuts, seeds, and avocados.

The creators of the Flat Belly Diet got interested when a group of Spanish researchers published a study in the journal “Diabetes Care” showing that eating a diet rich in MUFAs could help PREVENT abdominal weight gain. The researchers studied three diets: one high in saturated fat, another high in carbohydrates, and a third rich in MUFAs on a group of patients with “abdominal fat distribution” which is the scientific way a saying “belly fat”. All three diets contained the same amount of calories but only the MUFA diet was found to reduce belly fat.

Let me emphasize that this was not a reduced calorie diet with a lot of exercise. The participants who simply ate more MUFAs lost belly fat.

MUFAs are in the “good” fat category along with polyunsaturated fats and omega 3 fish oils. These “good fats” are an important energy source. They are used by the body in the production of cell membranes and hormones, and help the body absorb nutrients.

Prevention magazine's Flat Belly Diet isn't so much about eating LESS, eating LOW FAT, or eating LOW CARBS, it's about eating moderate amounts of MUFAs with every meal.

Another study cited in the book “Flat Belly Diet” was given to illustrate the fat burning power of these mono-unsaturated fatty acids. The study was performed in Australia. It compared fat-burning rates after two different types of breakfasts: one with saturated fat from cream, and the other with MUFAs from olive oil.

The group that had the MUFA breakfast burned significantly more body fat in the 5 hours following breakfast, particularly in the subjects with greater abdominal fat, which suggest the MUFA breakfast actually SHIFTED the body into more of a fat “burning” mode.

The data is impressive, but as a nutritionist I'm always interested in the nutritional integrity of the diet. Many research studies have looked at the link between MUFA intake and life expectancy. A follow up to the Italian Longitudinal Study on Aging 8 1/2 years later found that a higher MUFA intake was associated with an increase of survival. There was no effect found in any other selected food group.

Another study done in Greece found that the exclusive use of olive oil in food preparation was associated with a 47 % lower likelihood of having cardiovascular disease. Olive oil has been shown to reduce levels of LDL cholesterol. Research has shown that olive oil as well as other MUFAs found in plant fats including nuts, seeds, and avocados have been shown to reduce rates of type 2 diabetes, metabolic syndrome, breast cancer and inflammation.

MUFAs are responsible for healthier blood pressure, brain function, and lung function. I think you get the idea. From a nutritional viewpoint, the new Flat Belly Diet is very similar to what some call the Mediterranean diet. Mediterranean countries have considerably less heart disease than in the U.S.

The biggest difference with the flat belly diet is that you eat 400 calories each meal, you never go more than 4 hours without eating, and you eat a moderate amount of MUFAs at every meal. You can learn more

about the book and the diet at Prevention Magazine's website.... flatbellydiet.com.

As many of you know, monounsaturated fats or MUFAs are found in almond butter, natural peanut butter, pumpkin seeds, canola oil, sesame oil, olive oil, peanuts, pine nuts, brazil nuts, hazel nuts, walnuts, cashews, sunflower seeds, green and black olives, avocados, and best of all dark chocolate. Now that's what I'm talking about!

If your patients should ask about the Flat Belly Diet, I'd say give it a thumbs up, but with just one qualifier. Remember to keep a balance of the other GOOD fats as well, omega3 fatty acids found in fish or high quality supplements. I tell patients--think "lifestyle change" rather than a diet. Of course less of the saturated fats, animal fats like butter, cream, the fatty marbling in meats, and absolutely stay away from the hydrogenated oils and trans fats in processed foods.

So there you have it. The inside "nutritionist" scoop on the new Flat Belly Diet. As patients explore new diets and weight loss programs, you can be there with the nutritional principles to keep them on course. Thanks for reading today. I'll see you next Tuesday.