

My lower (not low) carb diet!

By Stonewall

When I first began my lifestyle change in January 2010 I was 230 lbs. That's when the light finally switched on after a conversation with my best friend (a doctor), a coworker (a legit genius), and my own online research from places like Johns Hopkins and UC Berkley. In a nutshell, "it's the carbs that make you fat". Today my average weight is 195 lbs. Occasionally I pick up a 35 lbs weight as a reminder of the extra weight I used to carry every day.

I do not advocate a low carb diet in line with Atkins, but I do believe through research and my own observations (including my own experience) that we, as Americans, over indulge in carbohydrates. After more than two years of my lower carb diet plan, I finally looked at the recommended daily allowance (RDA) of carbohydrates. An important bit of information I gained was the difference between simple and complex carbohydrates. That's something you should research on your own for a better understanding. For a 2,000 calorie diet, 300g of carbs are recommended, along with 30g of fiber. You'll notice most foods out there offer plenty of carbs, but fiber can often be hard to find.

Something I didn't know was that carbs, if not burned within 15 minutes, start being stored as fat. I thought fat made you fat, but actually, fat passes through your body and either exits the natural way, or does all the bad stuff like clogs your arteries in due time. But we're talking about weight loss and nutrition here, not heart disease. And the fact is, carbs make you fat, fat doesn't. Beware that "low fat" foods are often heavy in carbohydrates; just some food for thought, so to speak.

So, as my good friend and former Army team leader asked, "what exactly did you eat to help you lose weight and keep it off?" Well, Calvin, this may seem a bit unorthodox, but you asked for it, so here is what I did back then coupled with how I eat now...

Starting in January 2010 – I actually did go to the extreme for the first few weeks, maybe a month. I actually limited my daily carb intake to about 75 grams a day; sometimes I managed to take in fewer than 50 because it actually became pretty easy.

Breakfast was and still is the Atkins shakes. I do not follow the Atkins diet, however I am NOT a breakfast fan, and I need something to hold me over so why not go with something low carb, high protein, and has fiber? Both the EAS "Carb Control" and Atkins shakes are my favorites. Atkins also has bars that go well with a serving of milk, which I sometimes opt for.

I never bring my **lunch** to work. I either eat out or go to the employee cafeteria. No matter what, I closely scrutinize the menu options and go for lower carb meals. Except for sandwiches where the bread is the carb culprit, most carbs come from side items like french-fries, potato chips, potato salad, mac n' cheese, baked beans, garlic toast, etc.; and worse, soft drinks or sweet tea (more of a southern thing). I didn't realize just how many carbs (i.e. sugar) I took in from what I drank...A LOT! As an example for lunch out at my favorite BBQ place, I'll get a BBQ pork lunch with green beans, baked beans, tell them to hold the garlic toast, and chase it down with a diet coke. It took me all of one week to learn to enjoy diet coke. The baked beans do have a lot of sugar (carbs), mostly in the syrupy sauce, but I use a fork which allows most of the sauce to drip out. In my opinion, every bit helps. And don't listen to your mother; you're an adult and you DO NOT need to finish your plate.

Dinner became my favorite meal of the day because it offered me new challenges when I cook, and I love to cook. Look, guys, every carb counts, so some of the small things can make the difference. I created a few signature dishes, but nothing too out of the ordinary. My 3 favorite meals are seafood pasta, chicken & steak fajita salad, and tacos. How does pasta contribute to a lower carb meal plan? Cook smart! Buy pastas like Dreamfields or Barilla Whole Grains. Check out the nutrition facts on the side of the box. It'll look something like 41g of carbs and 5 to 7 grams of FIBER. Fiber is a key to your healthy diet, and so is following the magical term "serving size". I will eat a single serving size and be totally satisfied. So that's 41g of carbs with 7g of fiber. It's not scientific, but in my plan, I subtract 1 carb for every gram of fiber. It's called "net carbs". Dreamfields makes spaghetti and other pastas too.

For one of my other favorite meals, tacos, the carbs come from the soft tortillas or hard shells that you use. But you can buy smart here, too. For hard shell tacos I use Ortega Whole Grain Corn Taco Shells where a serving size is 2 shells with 18 carbs and 6 grams of fiber (12g net carbs). But if you like soft tacos, like me, go for Mission "carb balance" flour tortillas which have 19g of carbs, but a whopping 13g of dietary fiber for 6g of net carbs. That, my friends, makes for a good tasting taco or two with minimal carb intake. The main ingredients to tacos, of course is the meat. I use Jenny-O ground turkey. Trust me on this one! You won't be disappointed, but don't forget your taco seasoning or it'll just taste like meat on a tortilla.

Chicken and/or steak salads are amazing! Don't buy cheap stuff though, get the quality meats and use them within a day or two. Lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers, some quality shredded cheese, a scoop of guacamole, and some salsa, along with Marie's Chipotle Ranch makes for an awesome dinner salad. I often line the outside of the salad with Tostitos multi-grain chips (maybe 6 or 7) to help scoop up the guacamole, or sometimes I'll add sour cream too. Portion size counts, people! Just because I add sour cream and dressing to my salad, doesn't mean I drown my food. A single spoon full of sour cream and a serving of dressing is all that's called for. Carbs aren't always where you think they are, so things like dressing and sour cream; may not be "health foods", but they are low in carbs. Either way, don't over indulge just because they're low in carbs as they don't provide too much nutritional value either.

One more thing for dinner, my favorite, steak! Look, I'm not advocating eating nothing but meats and proteins, but a good portioned steak just makes me feel manly. With a healthy side of seasoned broccoli, you just can't go wrong. And where I used to have bread as a side, I just add some more broccoli, or if I'm feeling frisky, a small salad.

While I was asked for specific examples, it is hard to list everything we eat as part of our lower carb diet. It's all about choices, friends. You can go to McDonald's or Cracker Barrel and walk away satisfied without that tired feeling we get after devouring a heavy carb meal (*Big Mac has 47g of carbs, while 3 chicken selects have 21g*). Rolls or other breads, which are often handed out for free (Outback, Longhorn), french fries and tater tots, or the big no-no, regular soda, is what is going to add up in the end. And for what it's worth, Cracker Barrel actually has a low carb menu that rocks! Regardless of carb content, I have a rule that if it grows from the earth, I'll eat it. Green beans, broccoli (my favorite), zucchini, squash, and even a small baked potato, are all good in my book. Again, you can't live a no-carb lifestyle. Plain and simple, you need them and you must consume them. Just do so with portion size in mind.

If you are 30 to 40 lbs overweight like I was 2 ½ years ago, then do what I did if you think it will help. I started by limiting myself to roughly 25 carbs per meal, and snacked a little throughout the day. Mixed nuts

are a great snack, by the way (think net carbs, here). Once I was happy with the weight loss, I relaxed the diet a little. Today, 2 ½ years later, I probably average up to 250g of carbs per day versus more than 400g 2 ½ years ago. And there's no doubt that I splurge on occasion. Yes, occasionally I'll indulge myself by eating pizza, movie popcorn, or a pretty good dessert. You'll never have to schedule a "cheat day" as the world will schedule them for you. Someone will always be celebrating something at work where you'll find cake and cookies. Or Fridays will be "donut day" like at two places I've worked before. Take a look at the carb content in a single Krispy Kreme donut (22g)...and no one can eat just one! So to all of you who allot yourself a "cheat day", you're only cheating yourself.

Lastly, drink wisely. Not just the whole soda thing (I drink diet sodas every day), but take a look at Gatorade, fruit juice, and beer. I enjoy the Crystal Light packets for bottled water, Gatorade G2, Powerade Zero, and when it comes to alcohol, Bacardi (the clear stuff) and Diet Coke with a lime. It's all about decisions and it's not at all hard. It just takes some getting used to. For me, it took a week to get used to diet soda and about 2 weeks to master the carb content of foods after reading all the nutrition facts and serving sizes.

7 of our favorite dinners at home:

Ms. Paul's Extra Large Fish Sticks (4 to a serving, 18g carbs, 1g fiber, 190 calories)

9 medium cooked shrimp
Side of steamed broccoli

Rotisserie chicken (cooked & ready to serve) from the grocery store

Side of green beans
Serving of Velveeta Whole Grain Mac n' Cheese

Chicken & Steak Fajitas using Mission "carb balance" soft tortillas (low carb, high fiber)

All the fixin's on the fajitas (lettuce, tomato, sour cream, salsa, cheese)
Serving of refried or black beans (good source of fiber)

Catfish nuggets using a whole grain seasoning in a fry pan

Corn on the cob (or from a can)
Small side salad

Boneless chicken breast on the grill

Zucchini & Squash on skewers on the grill as a side
Cucumber salad with dill dressing

Steak on the grill (don't go for the "old ninety-sixer", choose the size wisely)

Small baked potato (maybe a big one that you split with someone)
Side of steamed broccoli

Spaghetti with quality ground beef (97/3 lean) using Dreamfields carb smart pasta

Side salad to your liking (I prefer Marie's Light Blue Cheese dressing)
**be sure you watch your serving of pasta. Enjoy, but don't over indulge.*