Is the South Beach diet for me? [1]

Alice,

What is good and bad about the South Beach Diet? What group of people does it work best for? What does it consist of? Would you advise someone to use the diet?

Answer

Dear Reader,

With so many diets out there to choose from — and many, such as the South Beach Diet, receiving so much press — it’s easy to get confused about each of the guidelines and specificities. You’re wise to do some additional research to figure out whether this particular diet is an appropriate fit for you! While some may find it helpful to lose weight, a balanced pattern of eating, regardless of any particular diet, can be achieved through the consumption of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean protein. Read on to learn more about the South Beach Diet and some things to keep in mind as you consider dieting and health more generally.

The South Beach Diet is considered a glycemic index diet. The glycemic index [2] is a measure of the relative impact of carbohydrate-containing foods on blood sugar [3]. The glycemic index of a food depends on how quickly its dietary carbs are digested and absorbed, which is determined by the food’s physical and chemical properties. Foods included in the South Beach Diet have a low-glycemic index — so in theory, they don’t cause a rise in blood sugar. However, there are factors other than food that influence glycemic index, including age, weight, and amount of food eaten at a meal.

The South Beach Diet is also considered a low-carbohydrate, high-protein diet that begins with a carbohydrate detox period known as phase one. During these first two weeks, those following the diet are advised to avoid nearly all carbohydrates such as bread, rice, potatoes, pasta, fruits, and dairy products. Phase two then slowly re-introduces a limited quantity of carbohydrates. Carbs are categorized as unprocessed foods with small amounts of natural sugar (such as whole grains, fruit, and some dairy products). Phase three is considered the maintenance phase, in which all types of foods can be eaten in moderation.

Does this three-phase model known as the South Beach Diet really work? It’s hard to say exactly
what leads to the results people using the South Beach Diet report. Given that the diet involves controlling calories and keeping their intake under a certain level — and that weight loss is typically achieved by balancing the overall number of calories a person consumes compared to the number of calories they burn — it's challenging to decipher whether the diet as a whole is contributing to seemingly positive outcomes, or whether they're simply a result of cutting calories.

On top of exploring what's behind the results often associated with the South Beach Diet, there are a few considerations about the diet as a whole you might also keep in mind. First, severely restricting carbs may increase the risk for ketosis, a metabolic state that can occur when you don't have enough glucose for energy. Possible side effects of ketosis include nausea, headaches, mental fatigue, bad breath, dehydration, and dizziness. Also, because the South Beach Diet limits the consumption of fruits, vegetables, and whole grain products (especially during phase one), overall intake of fiber, vitamins, calcium, potassium, magnesium, and iron is also reduced. This may be of concern to those who require more calcium and those who follow a plant-based pattern of eating, such as vegetarians and vegans, due to the diet's limitations on fruits, veggies, and dairy products.

Typically, diets don't lead to long-term weight loss for most people; once someone tries to resume typical eating patterns, they gain back weight they lost while dieting. That being said, the South Beach Diet and other diets may work best for people who don't mind limiting their food choices and who are able to control cravings. If you're considering starting a diet, you may ask yourself the following questions to help you determine if it's the right choice for you:

- Does it include a variety of foods from all of the major food groups?
- Does it include foods that you enjoy eating and could eat long-term (i.e., once the diet is over)?
- Does it include foods you can easily find (and afford) at local stores?
- Does it fit into your lifestyle?
- Does it have reliable research that indicates it can help you lose weight safely and effectively?
- Does it include physical activity?

It's worth noting that maintaining a healthy lifestyle and weight may be accomplished without dieting at all. Balancing the energy you take in and the energy you put out is essential. There's also balance to be found with regard to how much food is needed to fuel the body and to engage in physical activity — all of which will be dependent on and specific to individual needs. To learn more about your individual needs, consider consulting with a health care provider or a registered dietitian if you're concerned about your health or weight or if you have other questions.

Alice!

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