

Lifestyle Medicine Clinic
Duke University Medical Center

Low Carbohydrate Diet: Low-carb Menu Planning

Think Low-carb

What does a low-carb meal look like? You can teach yourself to begin looking at your daily menu with a low-carb eye by using the following as a meal template.

Breakfast

Protein source (usually meat or eggs) - Example: bacon and eggs

Low-carb vegetable (if desired) - Example: mushrooms for the omelet

Fat source (optional) - Example: cheese to make an omelet

Lunch

Meat or other protein source - Example: grilled chicken (leftovers or store - bought)

1 to 1 ½ cups of salad greens or cooked greens - Example: bagged salad greens

½ to 1 CUP of vegetables (if desired) - Example: peppers, tomatoes, and celery for salad

Fat source (optional) - Example: blue cheese dressing (low - carb)

Dinner

Meat or other protein source - Example: roast beef

1 to 1 ½ cups of salad greens or cooked greens - Example: cooked spinach

½ to 1 cup of vegetables - Example: green beans

Fat source (optional) - Example: butter for green beans, cheese sauce for spinach

Avoid veggie burn-out. Although many think of a low-carb diet as full of meat and fat, vegetables are an important part of the diet. However, many people fall into the trap of limiting their vegetable intake to salads and steamed vegetables. Here are some other ways to enjoy your veggies:

Raw vegetables and low-carb dip

Vegetables in a casserole with cheese, cream cheese, and/or cream

Stir - fried veggies with garlic, ginger, chiles, and/or soy sauce

Vegetables in soups or stews (with or without meat), for example, cream of broccoli soup

Veggies for breakfast, in an omelet, quiche, or frittata

Roasted veggies tossed with olive oil and garlic

Be creative. Breakfast for lunch or dinner? Dinner for breakfast? Be creative and try breaking out of the rut when it comes to what to have for breakfast or dinner. Omeletes make a quick, delicious dinner; chicken slices dipped in ranch dressing aren't so weird for breakfast after all!

Focus on what you *can* have. Butter, cream cheese, steak - you get the picture. These are not a required part of the diet, but they are options. Any diet that is to become a lifelong way of eating should be not only healthy, but enjoyable. Fat carries the flavor and texture of food; enjoy it as part of your low-carb diet. If you find that you miss a particular food, we can help you find a tasty, low-carb alternative.

Plan Low-carb

Have a "routine" meal. Choose one meal a day that is your "auto-pilot" meal. In general, many people feel comfortable eating the same breakfast or lunch over and over again, but prefer more variety with dinner. Try choosing a breakfast or lunch meal that you like and is easy to make or can be made ahead and have that every day while on induction. Here are some examples.

Breakfast: Custard Breakfast Squares Quiche Hard - boiled eggs and quick - cook
bacon Protein shake

Lunch: Chicken Caesar salad Tuna, egg, or chicken salad Chef salad made with
eggs and ham (or other meat)

Make leftovers on purpose. Leftovers from dinner make tasty lunches and quick dinners. Planned leftovers are an easy way to build variety and ease into your low-carb menu. Roast or grill more meat than you know you will serve at dinner. Repack the rest into serving-size portions to freeze or refrigerate.

Give your leftovers a new look. Few people want to eat the exact same dinner more than once a week. But your leftovers can turn into brand - new meal with a few quick tricks. Add cheese or a creamy sauce. Stir - fry meats and veggies with spices. Stuff an omelet or quiche. Add broth for soup. Chop or grind for a spread. Here are some suggestions:

Chicken or steak or stir - fry with vegetables
Cheese steak (or chicken) on a plate
Roasted vegetable and chicken/steak salad with balsamic dressing
Deviled ham salad

Write down a menu for the week. Using the ideas above, plan your menu for the week. Doing this on the weekend lets you do a bit of cooking and shopping ahead of time. If you're not up to thinking a whole week in advance, plan at least a few days ahead, so that you are not tempted by the drive - thru window. You can use the "menu grid" provided. Once you've done this a few times, recycle your previous weekly menus and the grocery lists that go with them.

Use your menu plan to make a grocery list. Check your fridge and pantry for staples (see list provided), check the sales flyers for good buys (see below), make your list, and stick to it.

Prepare yourself. If you can, do some meal preparation on weekend. You can grill a big bunch of meat, slow cook some beef stew or chili, and roast a couple of chickens - all of which will make easy, tasty leftovers during the week. Limited time on weekends too? Chop some veggies, brown some meat, etc. - give yourself a head start at least!

Keep it in the kitchen. If you have plans for a certain portion of your cooking leftovers, keep it in the kitchen. Set what you need aside before summoning the troops to the table.

Shop Low-carb

Know your grocery stores. Most grocery stores are organized with the good stuff around the outside aisles: produce, meat, dairy, seafood. Temptation and carbohydrates lurk down the center aisles. Leave your grocery cart on the end of the aisle and make only short scouting missions down the aisles in the middle of the store.

Read the labels. Carbs hide in many places. All food that comes packaged and processed should be checked for carb count, taking serving size and the list of ingredients into account as well. An item that has a low carb-count, but has flour, sugar, or corn syrup as it's first ingredient, is probably not a good carb choice. When you find a good low-carb item (pasta sauce or salsa, for instance), write down the brand name and variety on your shopping list for future reference. Or, when you run out, save the label.

Look in your cart. Before you check out, take a good, hard look at your grocery cart. All the food in it is going to be eaten by you or someone you care about. Sugars, preservatives, wheat flour, corn syrup - are these hiding in your cart contents somewhere? Choose wisely, and don't be embarrassed to re - shelve the stuff you know should not be there.

It Doesn't Have to Be Expensive:

Shop the sales. Remember that usually food sales run from Wednesday to Tuesday (our local Krogers stores run from Sunday to Saturday). All of the local grocery store chains have their sales flyers online (Foodlion, Harris-Teeter, Kroger, Lowes). Match the coupons in the Sunday paper to the sales in the grocery stores, and shop for savings early in the week.

Shop smart. If you have a warehouse club card, use it for bulk purchases of meat to be frozen for later use. If you don't have a warehouse club card, check out your local Hispanic grocery stores (not the little tiendas, but the actual markets like Galaxy or Compare). They have good meat prices, beautiful produce sections, and weekly sales as well. In addition, you can find delicious low-carb products you can't find elsewhere (frying cheese, fresh string cheese, fresh pork skins, etc.).

Protein is protein. Your body doesn't know the difference between a chicken leg quarter (cheap) and boneless, skinless breasts (expensive). Because you know that "fat is your friend," you don't need to pay extra for "lean" cuts of meat or ground beef. Use your slow cooker to make a tender beef stew or shredded pork BBQ with cheaper cuts. Don't forget eggs; buy them in bulk, and they are even cheaper.

Eat at home. If you are on a low-carb diet and you eat out a lot, you may find that you do spend more money (a steak is usually more expensive than a plate of pasta). Even fast - food places that offer low-carb options usually charge a premium for them. Take your lunch to work or school, and use the planning tips above to help you get in and out of the kitchen fast. Eating at home also helps you avoid temptation and hidden carbs - both of which are easily found in restaurants.

Avoid low-carb specialty products. With only a very few exceptions (almond flour & xanthan gum), your grocery list should look just like everyone else's - without the pasta, flour, beans, and rice. If you really miss some of those carby treats like muffins and brownies, learn to make a low-carb version at home or give them up altogether. Substituting expensive, highly - processed low-carb food for expensive, highly - processed high - carb food is not doing your body or your wallet any favors.