

just eat it

Do you avoid carbs at all costs? Shun sugar and dairy at every turn? Could be you're suffering from a food phobia or two, reports **Bronwen Gora**.

INSIDE OUT

cooling it



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April issue on sale now

Sam Wright thinks she's found the perfect solution to her weight problem. She's cut out all bread, pasta, potatoes and rice, and eats only steak, chicken and vegetables.

The only carbohydrates she allows to pass her lips, Sam says, is a slice of toast for breakfast. But Sam doesn't realise she's replacing all that lost energy from good carbohydrates with the eight teaspoons of sugar – pure carbohydrate – she puts in the four cups of coffee she's now drinking to get through the day.

"I can't exercise every day like I used to," she says. "I'm only running two or three times a week now because I just don't have the energy. But I've lost so much weight people are commenting."

attack of the killer carbs

Like many women and men, Sam suffers from a carbohydrate phobia. She's scared of eating bread and has placed pasta up there with King Island cream in the fattening department.

According to Helen O'Connor, dietitian with the Sydney Sports Medicine Centre at Olympic Park and a lecturer at Sydney University's Department of Exercise and Sports Science, many food phobias can be traced back to body-image problems.

The most common food phobia O'Connor sees is the anti-carbohydrate fad, spurred by the Atkins Diet. It's reportedly responsible for the stick-thin figures of stars such as Jennifer Aniston and Courteney Cox. The diet works in stages. First, you cut out carbohydrates to get your body into a state of ketosis, in which it rapidly burns fat. Then you increase your carbohydrate intake to just 20 per cent of your food intake. Nutritional guidelines set by the Australian Government recommend we eat 50 to 55 per cent carbohydrates.

"People I see on low-carb, high-protein diets range in how strict they are," O'Connor says. "Some may cut bread out but eat fruit; others cut pasta and eat rice."

But the reality is, most food phobias are impossible to maintain. Starve your body of certain nutrients and it will crave them. "People can lose a lot of weight on the Atkins Diet, but it's not a diet you can maintain," O'Connor says.

Just ask carb-conscious Sam Wright. "I only last a few months at a time – then I'm eating bread and pasta again," she says.

What you may not realise is that high-protein diets can be downright dangerous. Eating an above-average amount of protein



can damage your kidneys if they're already weak, and can lead to constipation through a lack of fibre.

Clinical studies of the Atkins Diet show that long-term use cause heart disease, high blood pressure and liver problems.

allergic or just intolerant?

Of course, some people cut out bread and pasta because they claim they're intolerant to wheat. It's true that eating too much wheat can make you feel sluggish and bloated, especially if you're in a sedentary desk job. But cut out wholegrain wheat products and you risk missing out on B vitamins and folate.

Sydney-based nutritionist Sue Radd says it's possible to live without wheat – people with coeliac disease, sparked by gluten intolerance, are forced to do so. "But you mustn't cut out other wholegrains like brown rice, corn, linseed or barley," Radd says.

The fibre from wholegrains has important health benefits: bowel cancer is one of the top four leading causes of death in Australia and is forecast to become the leading cause in the Western world, Radd says.

While carbohydrate has become a dirty word, the most fear-inducing foodstuff is still fat. But cutting good fats from your diet can have serious repercussions, including dry skin and, ironically, weight gain, as your body doesn't function properly when it's deprived of essential nutrients.

Omega 3 oils are helpful in preventing diseases, especially cancer. The best sources are fish, soybeans, canola oils, walnuts and linseeds.

Don't make the mistake of thinking

that if something is low-fat, it must be healthy. Many low-fat and "light" foods are high in sugar. Nutritionists say that many people overindulge in low-fat foods because they're not as satisfying as full-fat versions. So, they end up eating too many sugars and don't lose weight.

Sugar is over-represented in many of our diets, especially as it's not something we need to eat. But nutritionist and author Cyndi O'Meara, an advocate of organic and whole foods, says a little bit of sugar is not a problem – and that goes for fat and salt, too.

"If a food doesn't reach the bliss point – and fat, salt and sugar are the three things that make food taste beautiful – then you'll feel deprived," O'Meara says.

When O'Meara cranks chai tea, she sweetens it using organic milk and muscovado, a sugar that is juiced and crystallised, rather than heavily-processed white sugar.

milking it

Dairy is another food group that's often avoided, particularly by women who are worried about putting on weight. They claim they're lactose intolerant, when in fact they're just trying to avoid the fat in milk, cheese and yogurt.

Milk is a good source of riboflavin, a B-vitamin. As with wheat products, if you're going to cut out dairy, you need to know how to get nutrients from other sources. Green leafy vegetables are a great choice: "Your absorption of calcium from milk is far less than that of the calcium in an organic vegetable," O'Meara says.

One of the most dangerous food phobias is the fear of eating fruit and vegetables. Some people ditch fruit because of its high sugar content, while others spurn vegetables, especially starchy pumpkin and potatoes, because of their high carbohydrate content. But eating fruit and vegetables is vital to long-term health, says Radd.

"There are now 200 studies saying vegetables and fruit are strongly protective against a range of cancers," Radd says. Her book, *Eat To Live*, explains how phytochemicals found in plant foods work to prevent cancerous cells from taking hold, and fight cancer cells that do take hold.

"In time, it's likely that a deficiency of the phytoestrogens could be linked to many more diseases than just cancer, including osteoporosis and degenerative conditions as Parkinson's disease," Radd says. "The wide range of phytochemicals in fruit and vegetables will never be found in just one pill. People put themselves at risk if they only rely on taking vitamin supplements. They've got to get back to nature and eat more plant food."

