How to Use This Guide

A quick Google search will bring up countless results on ketogenic diets — about 147 million hits at the time of writing.

Not only are blog posts (and magazines, and celebrities ...) into keto, but the past few years have seen a sharp increase in the number of scientific articles investigating the diet. All this attention has brought along with it a lot of hype and confusion about just what the keto diet can do.

Figure 1: Scientific articles on keto published per year

Figure 2: Google search trend for keto diet
That's why we’ve written this guide. What does the latest high-quality evidence say about keto? Is it safe? What are its benefits and downsides? What (and whom) is it best for? How well does it work in the long term? What are the results experienced by endurance athletes, strength athletes, regular gym goers, couch potatoes, and many other categories? That’s what you’re about to discover.

Choose your own adventure

Give me what I need to get started

If you’re a cut-to-the-chase kind of person, someone who just wants to know the “what” of keto, then Keto 101: The Practice of Keto is where you should start. You will find:

- An overview of the keto diet (basic information and core concepts)
- A guide to getting your diet started
- Advice to help you stick to your diet in a world filled with carbs
- Tips to help you deal with unwanted side effects that may arise on a keto diet
- Answers to common questions about keto’s interactions with specific health conditions

Give me all the facts

If the basic facts aren’t enough for you, if you want to know the underlying “why” behind each “what”, then head over to Keto 201: The Science of Keto, where each chapter provides a deep dive into the scientific literature. Is keto better for fat loss than any other diet? Does it hurt muscle growth? How does it affect your blood sugar levels? We’ve got you covered.

Additionally, every chapter is enriched with explainer boxes:

- Boxes that teach important scientific concepts
- Boxes that analyze essential studies
- Boxes that introduce emerging research
- Boxes with warnings and tips to keep in mind
Some Highlights

**Body composition**

- Why you quickly lose weight on keto (at first)
  - Pages 63–68
- Is keto better for fat loss?
  - Pages 18, 70–83
- The best-kept secret of diet trials
  - Pages 78–82
- How keto affects lean mass
  - Pages 54–55, 84–93
- How to improve body comp on keto
  - Pages 54–55, 93–104

**Strength**

- Does keto kill your muscle gains?
  - Pages 55, 114–117
- The limitations of keto and muscle building research
  - Pages 54, 113

**Endurance**

- How keto-adaptation affects endurance performance
  - Pages 54–55, 130–131
- Scenarios in which keto may help endurance
  - Pages 54–55, 131–132

**Ketone supplements**

- Should you be taking ketones for performance?
  - Pages 49–50, 136
- The effects of ketone supplements on health
  - Pages 50, 137–139
- Do MCTs help with weight loss?
  - Pages 50, 142–143

**Blood sugar**

- How keto could affect heart health
  - Pages 27–29, 149, 195–197
- Diabetes treatment and prevention: is keto good for both?
  - Pages 58, 151–159
- How to measure changes in blood sugar over time
  - Page 155

**Warnings**

- Situations in which keto can cause harm
  - Pages 52–53
- What blood tests you should consider getting
  - Pages 168–169
- Discover lesser-known interactions between keto and drugs
  - Pages 169–171
- Why you should probably count only net carbs
  - Pages 26, 174–175
- What nutrients you may be underconsuming
  - Pages 48–49, 175–193
10 MEDICAL DISCLAIMER

11 PREFACE

KETO 101: THE PRACTICE OF KETO

16 CHAPTER 1: THE BASICS OF KETO
  16 What is a keto diet?
  18 Is keto the best diet for fat loss?
  20 What are ketones and ketosis?
  22 How do you measure your ketone levels?

26 CHAPTER 2: EATING KETO
  26 Carbohydrate
  27 Fat
  29 Protein
  31 Can you be vegan or vegetarian and keto?
  32 Specific foods

36 CHAPTER 3: STARTING KETO
  36 How should you go keto?
  37 How long does it take to go keto?

40 CHAPTER 4: MAINTAINING KETO
  40 Is a keto diet hard to maintain?
  43 How can you eat out and stay keto?
  43 What should you do if you can’t stick to keto?

45 CHAPTER 5: TROUBLESHOOTING KETO
  45 What can you do about the “keto flu”?
  46 What can you do about the “keto breath”?
  47 How do you avoid constipation?
  47 How do you avoid muscle cramps?
  48 Are there supplements you should take?

51 CHAPTER 6: HEALTH CONCERNS
  51 Is the keto diet healthy and safe?
  52 When is keto contraindicated?
  54 Should you worry about ketoacidosis?
  54 Keto and exercise

56 CHAPTER 7: CAN KETO TREAT … ?
  56 Can keto treat Alzheimer’s?
  56 Can keto treat autism?
  57 Can keto treat cancer?
  58 Can keto treat diabetes?
  59 Can keto treat epilepsy?
  59 Can keto treat Lou Gehrig’s disease?
  59 Can keto treat migraines?
  60 Can keto treat Parkinson’s disease?

KETO 201: THE SCIENCE OF KETO

62 CHAPTER 8: BODY COMPOSITION
  63 What is body composition?
  64 Water weight
  71 Fat mass
  84 Muscle mass
  93 Improving body composition on keto

107 CHAPTER 9: STRENGTH
  108 No carbs, no strength: the theory
  113 Your strength on keto: from theory to practice
  115 Theory vs. practice: why the disconnect?

118 CHAPTER 10: ENDURANCE
  119 Keto-adaptation: the theory
  122 Keto-adapted athletes: from theory to practice
  126 Theory vs. practice: why the disconnect?
  131 Does keto have any endurance-related benefits?

133 CHAPTER 11: KETONE AND MCT SUPPLEMENTS
  134 Why supplement in the first place?
  134 Exogenous ketones
  139 MCTs

144 CHAPTER 12: BLOOD SUGAR
  145 Diabetes: a major public health problem
  148 Does keto for diabetes make sense?
152 Do ketogenic diets uniquely help treat diabetes and prediabetes?
159 What about when ketogenic diets are better for weight loss?
161 Type I diabetes
162 Commonsense keto

166 CHAPTER 13: WARNINGS
167 Why does keto warrant safety considerations?
167 When is keto not recommended?
168 Do you need to monitor health biomarkers?
170 Medications
172 Supplements
174 Nutrients you should monitor
193 Common adverse reactions and side effects

202 CHAPTER 14: CLOSING REMARKS
202 Top 10 tips and takeaways to keep in mind

204 APPENDICES
204 Appendix A: Tables of low-carb foods
216 Appendix B: Tables of low-carb foods rich in commonly underconsumed nutrients

229 REFERENCES
List of Figures & Tables

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE
- Figure 1: Scientific articles on keto published per year
- Figure 2: Google search trend for keto diet

KETO 101: THE PRACTICE OF KETO

CHAPTER 1: THE BASICS OF KETO
- Table 1: Carbohydrate intake for different diets
- Figure 1: Variants of the ketogenic diet
- Figure 2: Ketone production
- Figure 3: The breath acetone spectrum
- Figure 4: Color chart results for urine ketone levels (mmol/L)

CHAPTER 2: EATING KETO
- Figure 1: Food choices permissions on a keto diet
- Figure 2: Mechanism through which dietary protein might hurt bone health
- Figure 3: Vegetarian- and vegan-friendly sources of protein
- Figure 4: Possible roles of red meat in type II diabetes

CHAPTER 3: STARTING KETO
- Figure 1: Changes in β-hydroxybutyrate (βHB) levels under various physiological states
- Figure 2: How various measures of fat-adaptation behave once a keto diet is initiated

CHAPTER 5: TROUBLESHOOTING KETO
- Table 1: Recommended hours of sleep, by age
- Figure 1: Factors to consider when buying a multivitamin
- Figure 2: Hype versus reality

CHAPTER 6: HEALTH CONCERNS
- Figure 1: Articles published on the ketogenic or Mediterranean diets

CHAPTER 7: CAN KETO TREAT … ?
- Figure 1: Headache occurrence over six months on a keto or non-keto diet

CHAPTER 8: BODY COMPOSITION
- Figure 1: Components of body composition
- Figure 2: Depiction of glycogen
- Table 1: Weight and glycogen capacity of a healthy liver
- Table 2: Grams of glycogen stored in a kilogram of healthy muscle (g/kg)
- Table 3: Signs and symptoms of hypohydration and hyponatremia
- Figure 3: Components of total energy expenditure
- Figure 4: Macronutrient contents of the diets
- Figure 5: Energy expenditure** and fat mass
- Figure 6: 12-month weight change for each DIETFITS participant
- Figure 7: Changes in body weight in the Virta Health study
- Figure 8: Changes in central abdominal fat in the keto group* in the Virta Health study
- Figure 9: Influences of GLP-1 and ghrelin on appetite
- Table 4: Controlled trials of keto with prescribed exercise
- Figure 10: Difference in fat-mass loss (left) and lean-mass gain (right) between keto group and control group
- Figure 11: DXA body-composition changes after a 1-week high-carb diet
- Table 5: Controlled trials of keto without prescribed exercise
- Figure 12: Changes in lean and fat mass on a keto diet without prescribed exercise
- Figure 13: Different methods of body-water manipulation lead to different DXA readings
- Figure 14: Percentage change from baseline in the KD and NKD groups
- Figure 15: Protein intakes and blood ketone levels
List of Figures & Tables

185 Table 11: Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA) for Magnesium (mg)
185 Table 12: Tolerable Upper Intake Level (UL) for Supplemental Magnesium (mg)
186 Figure 5: Oral bioavailability of various magnesium salts in humans
187 Table 13: Recommended Dietary Allowances (RDAs) for Potassium (mg)
187 Table 14: Signs and symptoms of hyponatremia
188 Table 15: Adequate Intake (AI) for Sodium (mg)
189 Table 16: Recommended Dietary Allowances (RDAs) for Vitamin A (mcg RAE)
190 Figure 6: Symptoms of vitamin C toxicity and deficiency
190 Table 17: Recommended Dietary Allowances (RDAs) for Vitamin C** (mg)
191 Figure 7: Blood levels of vitamin D status
192 Table 18: Recommended Dietary Allowances (RDAs) for Vitamin D (IU**)
193 Table 19: Reported short- and long-term side effects of medical ketogenic diet therapy for the treatment of epilepsy
195 Figure 8: Ketone bodies
196 Figure 9: How oxidized LDL may contribute to atherosclerosis
198 Table 20: Signs and symptoms of hypohydration

APPENDICES
204 Table 1: Low-carb alcohol
205 Table 2: Low-carb beverages
206 Table 3: Low-carb dairy
207 Table 4: Low-carb fruits
209 Table 5: Low-carb legumes
211 Table 6: Low-carb nuts and seeds
212 Table 7: Low-carb vegetables
216 Table 1: Low-carb foods rich in calcium
217 Table 2: Low-carb foods rich in fiber
219 Table 3: Low-carb foods rich in folate (B9)
220 Table 4: Low-carb foods rich in iodine
220 Table 5: Low-carb foods rich in iron
221 Table 6: Low-carb foods rich in magnesium
222 Table 7: Low-carb foods rich in potassium
223 Table 8: Low-carb foods rich in sodium
224 Table 9: Low-carb foods rich in thiamine (B1)
225 Table 10: Low-carb foods rich in vitamin A
226 Table 11: Low-carb foods rich in vitamin C
227 Table 12: Low-carb foods rich in vitamin D
What can you do about the “keto flu”?  

In the first 1–4 weeks of trying the keto diet, you may experience fatigue, nausea, bad breath, intestinal discomfort, headaches, brain fog, or other various ailments. This collection of symptoms is commonly referred to as the “low-carb flu” or “keto flu”. Luckily, they are often temporary and we walk you through what steps to take to help prevent or alleviate some of these unwanted side effects.

The keto flu will manifest in different ways to different people, if at all. As we saw, we go into more depth on how to avoid or manage adverse reactions and side effects you may experience on the keto diet. Very briefly, here are some general strategies you may try.

- Increase your fiber intake, which can help to alleviate constipation.
  - Psyllium can be a good option due to its high viscosity and low degree of fermentation, making it less likely to produce unwanted side effects. Take 10–15 g/day in divided doses across multiple meals.

- Increase your fluid intake, which may help to generally alleviate symptoms.
  - Add at least 710 mL (24 oz) of a carb-free beverage to your diet.

- Increase your electrolyte intake, as many people see intakes drop on keto
  - For sodium, try increasing your daily intake to 3–5 g/day. Remember, this is a total of 3–5 g/day from foods plus added sodium, not just from added sodium. If you have been prescribed a low-sodium diet, speak with your physician before upping your intake.
  - For magnesium, start with 200 mg of elemental magnesium once a day. If you don't notice symptom improvement, you can increase your dose to 350 mg/day.
  - For potassium, supplements will likely be insufficient for improving overall potassium intake, as most contain <100 mg (compare that with an RDA of 3,400 mg for adult males and 2,600 mg for adult females). Incorporating more potassium-rich foods into your diet can help maintain adequate levels during your transition to the keto diet. Remember, too much potassium at once on an empty stomach can lead to hyperkalemia (very high levels of potassium in the blood).
• For calcium, supplementation is best considered only after a dietary evaluation, as overconsumption may have negative effects on cardiovascular health. Track what you eat for a week and compare the calcium content of your diet with the RDA for your gender and age. If, on average, you are getting less than 80% of your RDA, supplementation becomes a possibility, but you should first consider tweaking your diet.

• Get sufficient and quality sleep. Can never go wrong with getting good sleep.

Table 1: Recommended hours of sleep, by age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AGE</th>
<th>RECOMMENDED</th>
<th>MAY BE APPROPRIATE</th>
<th>NOT RECOMMENDED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0–3 months</td>
<td>14–17</td>
<td>11–19</td>
<td>&lt;11 or &gt;19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4–11 months</td>
<td>12–15</td>
<td>10–18</td>
<td>&lt;10 or &gt;18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–2 years</td>
<td>11–14</td>
<td>9–16</td>
<td>&lt;9 or &gt;16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3–5 years</td>
<td>10–13</td>
<td>8–14</td>
<td>&lt;8 or &gt;14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6–13 years</td>
<td>9–11</td>
<td>7–12</td>
<td>&lt;7 or &gt;12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14–17 years</td>
<td>8–10</td>
<td>7–11</td>
<td>&lt;7 or &gt;11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18–25 years</td>
<td>7–9</td>
<td>6–11</td>
<td>&lt;6 or &gt;11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26–64 years</td>
<td>7–9</td>
<td>6–10</td>
<td>&lt;6 or &gt;10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≥65 years</td>
<td>7–8</td>
<td>5–97</td>
<td>&lt;5 or &gt;9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Hirshkowitz. Sleep Health. 2015. PMID:29073412

What can you do about the “keto breath”?
The ketone body acetone can be excreted via your breath, giving it a “nail polish remover” or “slightly fruity” smell. This smell is commonly referred to as “keto breath”. If you don’t like it, here are some potential solutions:

• Wait it out. Sometimes this can just go away on its own once your body has better adapted to the keto diet.

• Drink more fluids. Acetone can also be excreted through your urine. Theoretically, drinking more fluids may help decrease the amount that is excreted through your breath.

• Decrease ketone levels. If your breath is really bothering you, you can try to increase your daily carb intake level to help decrease the formation of ketones. Try adding 10–20 grams of carbs back into your diet and see what results this produces. Individual results will vary, so some trial and error testing will be needed.
• Mask the smell. Keep some sugar-free or low-carb mints, gums, mouthwashes, strips, or sprays on hand. Use as needed to keep “keto breath” at bay.

**How do you avoid constipation?**

If you experience constipation, try taking the following actions.

• Increase your soluble fiber intake. **Psyllium** may be a preferential fiber to start with due to its high viscosity and low degree of fermentation, thus being less likely to produce unwanted side effects. To supplement with psyllium, take 10–15 g/day in divided doses across multiple meals.

• Hydrate. Increase fluid intake throughout the day so that you're adding at least 710 mL (24 oz) to your diet. The infamous cup of coffee may help here too.

• Strategically use oils. Adding 1–2 tablespoons (15–30 grams) of **MCT oil** or mineral oil to your diet per day may help.

• If you need more immediate relief, the use of the over-the-counter drug **polyethylene glycol 3350** (MiraLAX®) can also be used.

**How do you avoid muscle cramps?**

It is possible this is occurring due to being under-hydrated and not consuming enough electrolytes.

**Should you increase your fluid intake?**

A keto diet can have a diuretic effect on your body, and maintaining adequate hydration can be helpful for fending off symptoms of the “keto flu” and constipation. Your body can adjust to this after a few weeks, but if you’re feeling a little dehydrated be sure to increase your daily fluid intake. A good starting point may be to take in at least 710 mL (24 oz) extra fluids per day.

**Should you increase your electrolyte intake?**

On a keto diet, a drop in electrolyte intake may be responsible for some of the symptoms of the “keto flu” (nausea, fatigue, brain fog, etc). To alleviate some of these symptoms, you can increase your intake of magnesium, sodium, and potassium in the first few weeks of a keto diet.
• For **sodium**, try increasing your daily intake to 3–5 g/day. If you have been prescribed a low-sodium diet, speak with your physician before doing so.

• For **magnesium**, start with 200 mg of *elemental magnesium* once a day. Increase to 350 mg as needed if no symptom improvements are seen.

• For **potassium**, supplements will likely be insufficient for improving overall potassium intake, as most contain <100 mg (compare that to an RDA of 3,400 mg adult males and 2600 mg for adult females). The incorporation of more potassium-rich foods into your diet can help maintain adequate levels during your transition onto the keto diet. A list of low-carb foods rich in potassium is available in appendix B.

• For **calcium**, supplementation with calcium is best considered only after a dietary evaluation, as overconsumption may have negative effects on cardiovascular health. Track what you eat for a week and compare the calcium content of your diet with the RDA for your gender and age. If, on average, you are getting less than 80% of your RDA, supplementation becomes a possibility, but you should first consider tweaking your diet.

**Are there supplements you should take?**

There are certain micronutrients may be underconsumed on a keto diet. Where practical, supplements may be used to help fill these nutrient gaps. Here are the nutrients where you may experience low intakes.

- Calcium
- Fiber
- Iodine
- Iron
- Magnesium
- Potassium
- Sodium
- Vitamin A
- Vitamin B1 (thiamine)
- Vitamin B9 (folate)
- Vitamin C
- Vitamin D

We cover each of these nutrients in the [Warnings](#) chapter and show you how to modify your diet with foods and/or supplements to ensure you are receiving adequate levels.

Additionally, if you are looking to increase your exercise performance, the addition of creatine monohydrate may help. The standard dose is 5 g/day. People with more muscle mass may benefit from as much as 10 g/day, but this claim is not fully supported by the evidence. To supplement 10 g/day, take 5 grams twice a day.
**Tip: Much ado about multivitamins**

You may be inclined to take a multivitamin while you are on a keto diet as a sort of insurance policy against nutrient deficits. A multivitamin isn’t strictly necessary but could make things easier if it is well formulated.

When buying a multivitamin, check on the label the content of each serving, the number of pills per serving, and the number of servings per day; don’t pay more for dubious bells and whistles; and stick to a company with a reputation for good manufacturing.

**Figure 1: Factors to consider when buying a multivitamin**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Multivitamins don’t meet the RDAs for some micronutrients</th>
<th>Multivitamins may contain extra ingredients but in too-small doses (e.g., lycopene)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vitamins</strong></td>
<td><strong>Iron</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

High-dose multivitamins make you choose between too much of some vitamins and not enough minerals

Don’t pay extra for multivitamins that contain many superfluous, often unproven ingredients

High-dose multivitamin

Serving: 8 capsules

- 8 capsules = 50% RDA of some vitamins
- 2 capsules = not enough minerals

Normal-dose multivitamin

Serving: 1 capsule

- 1 capsule = 100% RDA of vitamins
- 1 capsule = useful dose of minerals

Always buy from a reputable company with good manufacturing practices.

**Should you take ketone supplements?**

Ketones taken as a supplement (aka exogenous ketones) are very trendy in the keto diet space. As with most new supplements, there’s a lot of hype and precious little research. Let’s review the data to get a clear picture of what the evidence currently says.