


“ I got my tax refund
in **two weeks.**
Not two months. ”



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al lewis

From Atkins to Fatkins: Carb curbs feel empty

By Al Lewis

Denver Post Business Columnist

My pet stomach and I waddled down to the Adam's Mark Hotel on Thursday for the LowCarbiz Summit, which was actually sponsored by Blimpie.

Bacardi and Diet Coke was "the official adult beverage" of the summit. Also displayed were Baja Bob's low-carb mixes - margaritas, Sweet-N-Sours, piña coladas and Bloody Marys. Two of those and you not only lose your carb count but delude yourself into believing you have washboard abs.

I walked my pet stomach from booth to booth, chomping low-carb cookies, brownies, candies, ice creams, crackers, tortillas, breads, and chips. I noticed many of the 480 other attendees were walking pet stomachs, too. I can't say how many carbs I ingested because some products were labeled "zero net effect carbs" and others, "net carbs." Experts disagree as to whether these methods are accurate. But such debates are irrelevant because sweat pants with expandable waistbands are available at every Wal-Mart.

Many of the products I sampled tasted like sawdust sweetened with antifreeze. Some contained hydrogenated oils and chemicals I'd rather not try to spell.

This, they say, is the future of food. And lots of food makers are trying to get rich by affixing "low-carb" to their products, just as others used "low-fat" years ago.

Denverite Dean Rotbart, who organized the summit



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and started LowCarbBiz magazine in June, estimates the low-carb industry will double this year. So will my gut.

Rotbart's consultant, Gus Valen of The Valen Group in Cincinnati, unveiled research showing that 28 percent of U.S. adults are trying to control their carbohydrate intake - some by swapping potato chips for pork rinds.

Everywhere you look, purveyors of sugar, starch and wheat are losing business. The only way to regain it is to remove the carbs or start selling beef cakes.

"This is a threat," Valen said, "but it's also an opportunity."

David Martinez, 43, of Hutto, Texas, was pitching low-carb cereals, pancake mix, pizza dough and granola made from flax. The beefy salesman said he went on a low-carb diet in 1999. By 2001, he and his wife, Colleen, started a company called LowCarb Success.

They hawked their products to health food stores and made a half-million dollars in sales their first 18 months. Last year, sales soared to \$4 million.

"This is a ministry to me," Martinez said. "Diabetes is prevalent among Hispanics, and I've got family dying because of it."

In 1999, I nearly lost my pet stomach to the Atkins diet. My weight slid from 190 to 160.

One day I interviewed Colorado Division of Securities Commissioner Fred Joseph, and he asked me what happened. I told him I was eating eggs, bacon, steaks, pork chops and cheeseburgers without the bun. He laughed and said I was nuts.

Months later, I was walking the 16th Street Mall only to be greeted by a skeleton. "Al, you changed my life," the bones cried out. I realized I was beholding the gaunt remains of Fred Joseph.

It was horrifying. To my regular diet of burgers, I added back buns and fries. I went from Atkins to Fatkins about as fast as you can say "Biggie-size it."

Clearly, low-carb diets are better than the stuff-everything-in-your-fat-face diet or the epidemic of fork-in-mouth disease.

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But low-carb diets have been around for more than a decade, and obesity rates are climbing.

Advertisers confuse us with images of shapely models one second and a Meat Lovers Pizza the next. Do you want a slender body or a full buffet? Low-carb entrepreneurs are here to muddle the answer.

I've got to go now. My pet stomach needs another walk.

"Here, boy, have a cookie. Only 7g net carbs!"

Al Lewis' column appears Sundays, Tuesdays and Fridays.

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