

Battle OF THE Sexes

weight loss edition



When it comes to losing weight on keto, there's a clear winner (spoiler alert: the guys take the lead). But that doesn't mean that women can't break past the barriers that hold them back.

BY Holly Pevzner

Watching

your guy lose weight at lightning speed can be frustrating, but there are ways to catch up.

You've heard it before: Men lose weight faster on the keto diet than women. It's mostly true. But what's also true: "Women in general lose weight slower than men, regardless of the diet," says Kristin Kirkpatrick, MS, RDN, a dietitian consultant for the Cleveland Clinic Center for Integrative and Lifestyle Medicine in Ohio. In other words, don't point the finger at keto.

One of the main reasons that the guys tend to outpace the gals when it comes to losing weight on keto is that men usually have greater muscle mass compared with women, so they naturally burn more calories at rest, says Kirkpatrick. On top of that, there are physical and lifestyle differences between the sexes that can cause women to lose weight at a slower pace. It's not fair, but it's fixable. Read on to learn about the women-specific weight loss roadblocks that you may encounter while on keto as well as ways to navigate around them.

The Roadblock: Hormones

"I think the differences women experience with keto likely relates, in part, to hormones," says Sara Gottfried, MD, a gynecologist in Berkeley, California who practices functional medicine and the author of *Brain Body Diet*. For instance, if estrogen and progesterone are imbalanced, insulin sensitivity becomes imbalanced as well. "This makes it hard to lose weight—and even easier to gain weight," says Mark Hyman, MD, medical director of The UltraWellness Center in Lenox, Massachusetts.

What to do Because hormones can be such an influential aspect of a woman's success or struggle with the keto diet, Gottfried recommends that women get their hormones tested before embarking on a ketogenic diet. "The HPATG axis, or hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal-thyroid-gonadal axis, is essentially the control system for hormones," says Gottfried. "If a woman has HPATG axis dysregulation, she'll need to adjust her carbo-

hydrate intake accordingly.” Talk with your doctor about whether a hormone test is right for you. (For more on hormones and keto, turn to pg. 30.)

The Roadblock: Genetics

“Genes also play a role in how well keto can work,” says Kirkpatrick. “Many women I’ve counseled have a more difficult time losing weight when their genetics and fat choices don’t mix,” says Kirkpatrick. “For instance, some genes work against you when your saturated fat content is high, so we work on swapping those choices with monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fat instead.” In all, there are about 10 gene variations associated with an altered response to keto.

What to do Consider nutritional counseling. “Oftentimes, women come to me at the Cleveland Clinic so I can help assess their genetic predisposition for success with weight loss, including with the ketogenic diet,” says Kirkpatrick. Something else to consider is nutrigenomics testing, which looks at how genes affect a person’s response to a diet. Using a saliva sample, doctors can assess whether genes involved in metabolism and



More sleep is the solution for so much in life, including weight loss on keto.

the breakdown of fat are at odds with the types of foods a patient is consuming while on

keto. Many companies now offer nutrigenomics testing, but keep in mind that some experts say more research is needed before we can prescribe nutrition advice based on genetics alone.

The Roadblock: Stress And Sleep

Another keto influencer that especially impacts women is stress. According to the American Psychological Association’s annual *Stress in America* survey, women consistently report significantly higher levels of stress than men. “Taking on any diet, including keto, can feel overwhelming, which adds even more stress for women,” says Hyman. “Increased stress can then lead to a rise in cortisol, the stress hormone that leads

to excess belly fat and resistance to weight loss.”

Piggybacking on the stress situation is sleep, or more accurately, a lack of sleep. “Women are so often the primary caregivers in the household, which generally negatively impacts sleep,” says Kirkpatrick. “This in turn adversely affects hunger hormones and, ultimately, success in weight loss with the keto diet.”

What to do Try to carve out some downtime during your first few weeks on the keto diet, even if that means hiring a babysitter for an hour or two. Additionally, aim to set a healthy sleep schedule. Start by going to bed and waking up at the same time daily (yes, even on the weekends), then slowly shift your bedtime forward until you’re getting at least seven hours of sleep a night.

Some Good News...

“Even though men often lose weight faster on keto than women, some studies—and in what I’ve seen in my own practice—suggest that total weight loss usually evens out after about six months,” says Kirkpatrick. “The key is sticking with it long enough for it to even out.” So don’t let a slower loss or plateau deter you—you’ve got this!

4 Reasons You’re *Not* Losing Weight

1 You forgot the electrolytes. When you switch to a keto diet, your body’s electrolyte levels, which include sodium, potassium and magnesium, can drop, leading to the keto flu. This can derail people. Avoid this by talking with your doctor about whether taking electrolyte supplements or eating potassium- and magnesium-rich foods can help.

2 You’re going it alone. “Social support makes a big difference in keto success,” says Kristin Kirkpatrick. “It can be a tough transition, but having someone go through it with often leads to greater benefits.” Your keto pal doesn’t have to be someone you meet up with in person. Online buddies work too, so consider joining a keto Facebook group.

3 You’re neglecting your gut. Healthy and diverse gut microbiome aids digestion, nutrient absorption and is key to maintaining a healthy metabolism. But since traditional keto limits some gut-healthy foods, pro- and prebiotic support is a must, says Sara Gottfried. “Without it, you can hinder the speed at which you lose weight while on the keto diet.”

4 You took a cheat day (or a few). That croissant may look tasty, but if you “cheat,” your body will go back to its preferred fuel (glucose). “And then you’re right back to square one, waiting days on end to reach ketosis again,” says Kirkpatrick. A better idea? Keto-friendly treats that only seem like a cheat. (Turn to pg. 52 for more on cheat days.)



What New Mamas Need to Know

Keto, quite simply, is not recommended for women who are pregnant or nursing. “Women have an increased carbohydrate need when expecting and when breastfeeding, so extreme carb restriction could impact the pregnancy and the body’s ability to produce breast milk,” says Sara Gottfried. Plus, it’s simply better for the baby’s growth and development if the mom-to-be consumes an abundance of food, including colorful fruits and vegetables, whole grains, legumes and high-quality protein. “This way, the baby is sure to get the nutrients they need, and the mother can have more mental and emotional space to eat a well-rounded diet to support her changing body,” says Hyman.

Women trying to conceive should be cautious as well, since one possible side effect of keto is menstrual irregularity. If you’re currently on keto and discover you’re pregnant, Gottfried encourages a modified Mediterranean diet instead, which has been shown to reduce pregnancy-related weight gain and lower the risk of gestational diabetes. Talk with your doctor, who can help you slowly shift plans.