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Ideal Protein plan is called 'nutrition on autopilot'

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Lately, it seems everyone is talking about Ideal Protein, the weight-loss plan du jour. It's so popular you can even find Ideal Protein items on the menus of several area restaurants.

So, exactly what is this diet protocol and what makes it so popular?

"Ideal Protein is a weight-loss program that's about losing weight and keeping it off," says Melissa Martin, a registered dietitian and nutrition services manager at Woman's Center for Wellness. "The diet works differently with each person, but it's consistent in that dieters don't plateau like they do in most weight-loss programs, and that's great because we're an immediate gratification society."

Woman's Ideal Protein protocol comes in four phases. The first phase targets your habits and behavior, and is followed until 100 percent of your weight-loss goal is achieved.

"It's nutrition on autopilot," says Martin, who has done the diet. "It's very restrictive and allows you to change your behavior. You eat only vegetables, lean protein and Ideal Protein products. That's when you really lose the weight"

The main reason for this weight loss is the body goes into a metabolic state called ketosis, she explains. Normally your body burns carbohydrates for fuel, but when you drastically cut carbohydrates, it goes into ketosis and begins to burn its own fat for fuel. And, Martin says, that's another plus of Ideal Protein — it targets body fat and maintains muscle mass.

Phase II, which lasts two weeks, increases food selections for lunch.

"Once you reach your goal weight and complete Phase II, then we re-introduce healthy carbs, fruits, dairy products that are part of a healthy diet in Phase III," explains Martin. "Once you stabilize, we start talking about real life."

Phase IV is maintenance, which Martin confesses is ten times harder than the weight-loss plan.

"Regardless of the program, there will be those that struggle with maintenance," she says.

Sheila Talamo signed up for Ideal Protein at Woman's when it first began offering the program and lost 35 pounds, but confesses she wasn't a good a student.

"Inside of me is a happy little fat girl," she says with a chuckle. "I'm always in search of a diet. I've gained and lost weight repeatedly through my 65 years."

She says she only pretended to do the program's different phases, "but I really didn't follow the protocol. ... I never planned for maintenance."

She tried the program again, this time writing down the steps of her plan to make maintenance as successful as losing weight. "I'm a great dieter because I get real focused," she says. "Then I thought, if I make my plan public, I might be more inclined to follow it."

And that's when her blog, "Little Fat Girl," was born. "I do it not only for myself, but to share with others how I approach maintenance so we can all be successful," says Talamo.

This time she lost 22 pounds, and shed 15 inches, dropping her body fat from 32 percent to 23 percent “which at my age is pretty good.”

Restaurateur Ruffin Rodrigue, 47, started Ideal Protein about three years ago after several of his buddies dropped significant pounds on the plan.

“I weighed around 306-307 pounds. I hadn’t weighed that much since I played football,” says the former LSU offensive guard.

In the first six months, he lost 62 pounds.

“Actually for me, it was pretty easy,” says Rodrigue. “I enjoyed it. I got into ketosis fast; lost 17 pounds the first week.”

In the fall of 2011, Rodrigue says that while following the Tigers, he tailgated across the SEC.

“I gained a lot of the weight back, so I went back on the diet and lost it again,” he says. “I reduced my blood pressure 30 points ... my waist went from a 42 to a 36. You’re not supposed to work out on Ideal Protein, but I did. The hardest part was stopping drinking (alcohol) because you can’t for the first three or four months.”

Rodrigue is determined to keep the weight off this go around. He continues to work out, watches his carb intake and liked the food so much he added Ideal Protein items to the menu at both locations of Ruffino’s Restaurant.

So, is there a downside to Ideal Protein?

“If you have Type I diabetes, are pregnant or have kidney/liver disease you should not be doing this diet,” says Kate Blumberg, registered dietician and certified diabetes educator at Pennington Biomedical Research Center. “You need to talk to your doctor before you start ... it’s a very low-calorie diet, and it cuts out a lot of nutrients.”

That said, Ideal Protein dieters are typically under a doctor’s or health coach’s care.

“Any plan that provides some sort of meal replacement is an easy way to control calories,” says Blumberg. “In the short term it’s a really good way to lose weight.”