

# Unwrapping the Keto Diet

By **Pia de Jong** - April 3, 2019



*Illustration by Eliane Gerrits*

Because it is pouring rain, the six men who have been repairing our roof all morning have come inside to have their lunch at our kitchen table. They tell me that their families are originally from Pettoranello del Molise, in the mountains of Italy. There are three young men in their 20s,

two in their 40s, and the foreman, Mario, who is 50-ish. All are on the heavy side. They pull off their caps and wipe sweat from their foreheads. Then they unwrap the food that they have brought from home.

A plastic tray full of baked cauliflower, overflowing with melted cheese, a couple of sticks of butter, a bottle of coconut oil, a bowl of tomatoes, and chopped roast beef. When an enormous slab of bacon is extracted from aluminum foil, a hurrah arises. Time to attack!

Everyone piles bacon on his plate. The sliced butter is smeared over the cauliflower, which is already dripping with cheese and fat. Who needs my tea? They already have thermos jugs steaming with hot coffee spiked with coconut oil. Delicious! they all say. This is the tastiest diet we have ever followed.

Mario explains to me, "We were all too fat, pre-diabetic, had high blood pressure and bad cholesterol. And then we heard someone talk about the keto diet. That immediately attracted us, because we were allowed to keep our favorite foods. We all decided to start at the same time. And it works. We have already lost 90 pounds together." He wipes the grease from his mouth with a piece of paper towel.

The keto, or ketogenic, diet is extremely popular. You hardly eat carbohydrates, have a moderate amount of protein, but then you welcome a lot of fat. All this under the motto: Whoever wants to burn fat must eat fat.

In supermarkets there are special shelves with keto products intended to propel you into the fat-burning phase as quickly as possible. You can measure your progress with a test strip for your urine. The more it turns purple, the more fat you are burning.

I cannot bear to watch the men eating. This diet goes against everything I have learned about healthy eating. I associate bacon with lethal cardiovascular diseases in such a way that I do not put it near my plate. Nutritionists worry about this diet causing liver and kidney damage. But for many Americans, including these men, a life without meat, and especially without bacon, is unthinkable. No matter whether they are watching TV, in the car, or at a baseball game, they snack on dried pieces of bacon and meat. They carry it everywhere, keeping it on ice.

"We feel better than ever," they say when they see me shuddering. "We're not hungry, really, not all day, while we work hard. We think more clearly, we sleep better, and our wives see us again. But there's no beer, we do miss that."

"We will stick with the diet for a while," says the youngest. "Another 70 pounds to go from the six of us. We give each other pep talks to make sure we make it."

"And what then?" I ask.

"No idea," they say. "But at least we will eat the things we now miss. "Pasta, of course, and pizza. And again nice cake when it's someone's birthday. Tiramisu, cannelloni, bread."

"And strawberry ice cream," adds the youngest.

"But we'll keep the bacon," they say together.

Ah, I am waiting for the next diet craze: the pasta-and-pizza-with-ice-cream diet.

Pia de Jong is a Dutch writer who lives in Princeton. Her memoir, "Saving Charlotte," was published by W.W. Norton in 2017. She can be contacted at [pdejong@ias.edu](mailto:pdejong@ias.edu). She is filling in for Richard K. Rein, who is on assignment.

## Facebook Comments

**Pia de Jong**