Diet Therapies for Epilepsy

Twenty to thirty percent of patients with epilepsy do not respond to medications. For those patients, diet therapy may be a good option. Diet therapy improves seizure control in approximately two thirds of patients.

Penn State Hershey Medical Center offers both the Ketogenic Diet and Modified Atkins Diet to selected patients. Both diets should only be started under the direction of a medical team. When present, improvement is often seen within the first 10 weeks on the diet. While on the diet, you will meet regularly with our team. Adjustments to the diet or medications will be made to achieve the best seizure control.

Ketogenic Diet

The Ketogenic Diet is a special high-fat diet used to treat seizures. Protein is given in amounts to help promote growth. A very small amount of carbohydrate is included in the diet. As the body uses fat as its main source of energy, ketones are produced. Ketones are believed to play a role in reducing seizures although the exact mechanism is not known.

The diet is calculated for each individual patient. All food must be carefully prepared and weighed on a gram scale. Each meal includes a small amount of protein (meat, poultry, egg, etc.), a small amount of carbohydrate (vegetable or fruit), and a large amount of fat (heavy cream, mayonnaise, margarine, oil, etc.). Special ketogenic formulas are available for children who are tube fed. The diet is started in the hospital over three to four days. During the hospital stay, our team will work closely with you to make sure you feel confident continuing the diet at home.

Modified Atkins Diet

The Modified Atkins Diet focuses on reducing carbohydrates and encouraging fats. Carbohydrate is limited to 10 to 15 grams per day at first. Calories are not restricted as with the ketogenic diet. Although food does not need to be weighed, total net grams of carbohydrate do need to be tracked each day.

Foods commonly eaten on the diet include beef, pork, poultry, fish, eggs, cheese, vegetables, oils, fats and heavy cream. The dietitian will help you plan meals, snacks and beverages that are very low in carbohydrate. The Modified Atkins Diet is started as an out-patient. You will meet twice with the dietitian and nurse practitioner to learn how to start the diet safely at home.

Appointments are made on a referral basis only from a Primary Care Provider. Please call 717-531-8790.