

The Truth about Counting Calories

By Tom Venuto, NSCA-CPT, CSCS, *GHF's Fat Loss Expert*

Do calories matter or do you simply need to eat certain foods and that will guarantee you'll lose weight? Should you count calories or can you just count "portions?" Is it necessary to keep a food diary? Is it unrealistic to count calories for the rest of your life or is that just part of the price you pay for a better body? You're about to learn the answers to these questions and discover a simple secret for keeping track of your food intake without having to crunch numbers every day or become a "food fanatic."

In many popular diet books, "Calories don't count" is a frequently repeated theme. Other popular programs, such as Bill Phillip's "Body For Life," allude to the importance of energy intake versus energy output, but recommend that you count "portions" rather than calories...

Phillips wrote,

"There aren't many people who can keep track of their calorie intake for an extended period of time. As an alternative, I recommend counting 'portions.' A portion of food is roughly equal to the size of your clenched fist or the palm of your hand. Each portion of protein or carbohydrate typically contains between 100 and 150 calories. For example, one chicken breast is approximately one portion of protein, and one medium-sized baked potato is approximately one portion of carbohydrate."

Phillips makes a good point that trying to count every single calorie - in the literal sense - can drive you crazy and is probably not realistic as a lifestyle for the long term.

It's one thing to count portions instead of calories – that is at least acknowledging the importance of portion control. However, it's another altogether to deny that calories matter. Is it necessary to count every calorie to lose weight? No. But it IS necessary to eat fewer calories than you burn. Whether you count calories and eat less than you burn, or you don't count calories and eat less than you burn, the end result is the same. Personally, I'd rather know exactly what I'm eating rather than take chances by guessing.

I believe that it's very important to develop an understanding of and a respect for the law of calorie balance (and portion control). I also believe that it's an important part of nutrition education to learn how many calories are in the foods you eat on a regular basis – including (and perhaps, especially) how many calories are in the foods you eat when you dine at restaurants.

Yes, calories do count! Any diet program that tells you, "calories don't count" or you can "eat all you want and still lose weight" is a diet you should avoid. The truth is, that line is a bunch of baloney designed to make a diet program sound easier to follow (anything that sounds like work – such as counting calories or eating less - tends to scare away potential customers!)

The law of calorie balance is an unbreakable law of physics: Energy in versus energy out dictates whether you will gain, lose or maintain your weight. Period.

To maintain your weight, you must consume the same number of calories you burn. To gain weight (muscle), you must consume more calories than you burn. To lose weight, you must consume fewer calories than you burn.

If you eat more calories than your body can utilize, you're going to gain fat, period. If you only count portions and haven't the slightest clue how many calories you're taking in, it's a lot more likely that you'll eat more than you realize. (Or you might take in fewer calories than you should and trigger the dreaded "starvation mode" which causes your metabolism to shut down).

So how do you balance practicality and realistic expectations with a nutrition program that gets results? Here's a solution that's a happy medium between strict calorie counting and just guessing:

Create a menu using an EXCEL spreadsheet or your favorite nutrition software. Crunch all the numbers including calories, protein, carbs and fats. Once you have your daily menu, stick it on your refrigerator (and/or in your daily planner) and you now have an eating "goal" for the day, including a caloric target.

That is my definition of "counting calories" -- creating a menu plan you can use as a daily guide, not necessarily writing down every morsel of food you eat for the rest of your life. If you're really ambitious, keeping a nutrition journal for at least 4-12 weeks is a great idea and an incredible learning experience, but all you really need to get started is one good menu. If you get bored eating the same thing every day, you can create multiple menus, or just exchange foods using your one menu as a template.

Using this method, you really only have to count calories once when you create your menus. After you've got a knack for calories from this initial discipline of menu planning, then you can estimate portions in the future and get a pretty good (and educated) ballpark figure.

For more information on calories (including how calculate exactly how many you should eat based on your age, activity and personal goals, and for even more practical, proven fat loss techniques that strip off body fat fast, check out my ebook, Burn The Fat, Feed The Muscle at www.burnthefat.com.