

Many people complain about having a hard time losing weight or meeting other physical goals such as gaining muscle. Likewise it is hard to know just how healthy your diet is at any given time. Many people rely on fad diets such as the ketogenic diet, Atkins diet, Paleolithic diet, or intermittent fasting among many others to help them focus on certain diet changes. Ultimately however, if anyone sees success with one of these diets, it is because they inadvertently put themselves in a caloric state that was conducive to their goals.

Your body uses calories for many different tasks. It's actually a relatively small percentage of calories that are consumed in exercise or daily activities that cause you to move. Another small percentage is used to help digest the food you eat (thermic effect of food). The rest are consumed keeping you alive. Your brain consumes a lot of calories carrying out executive tasks. Every cell in your body needs calories to perform their basic functions. The calories used in these ways are what comprise your basal metabolic rate and it can vary dramatically from person to person based on a variety of factors.

If you want to lose fat, you need to put your body into a state where it uses more calories than you eat. This causes the body to draw energy from fat. Fat is your body's way to store energy for times of caloric deficiency, so to lose it, you need to be in a caloric deficit. Likewise, building muscle requires extra energy and nutrients to be expended. Therefore in most cases, building muscle requires being in a caloric excess. Of course resistance training is also essential to building muscle. Calories alone will not lead to significant muscle growth, but rather increased fat. Determining what is considered a deficit or an excess for your own body is therefore key to meeting your goals. You can use a calculator like this (<http://www.acaloriecounter.com/calculator.php>) to get a pretty good starting point for what is called your "maintenance level." That basically is the amount of calories which would cause you to neither gain nor lose weight. Then you can adjust your lifestyle to be where you want to be. To lose weight, the ideal deficit is usually about 20% below maintenance level for most people. Exercise can of course increase the number of calories you use per day (thus increasing your maintenance level), but diet is much easier to control and has a much more dramatic impact on your success in losing weight.

A lot of people claim that they are dieting but aren't seeing the results they want. This usually is because while they may think they are eating fewer calories, they still are not in a caloric deficit. The only way to know if you are in fact in a caloric deficit is to track what you eat. Something like a food diary is a great way to keep track of everything you put into your body because it allows you to see the whole picture. If it turns out you are a few hundred calories too high for your goal, you can easily adjust. It allows you to draw the line at a certain point in the day if you realize you have already met your calorie intake goals. The only true way to see success in weight loss is to be in a caloric deficit, and tracking your calories gives you complete control. See the included examples for what a food diary could look like. Keep in mind that no matter how small it may seem, everything you eat should be tracked because the small things can add up over the day.

For certain goals you may wish to track your macronutrients (protein, carbohydrates, and fats). For example, someone wishing to build muscle will want to make sure they are meeting a certain threshold for number of calories from protein per day because protein is essential for muscle growth. If you feel macronutrients are helpful to your goal consider using a food diary that allows you to do so.

Another great way to track your calories or macronutrients is by using an app such as My Fitness Pal, Lose It!, or My Plate Calorie Counter. These keep everything in your compact phone and can more easily be used on the go. Some also have scanners that will read barcodes on food to import all of the nutrition information so you don't need to manually input it.

Regardless of whether you choose an app, a spreadsheet on your computer, or a printed food diary, it can be immensely helpful to track your calories so that you have total control over how many you are putting into your body.

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References:

<https://www.aworkoutroutine.com/how-to-increase-metabolism/>

<http://www.acaloriecounter.com/diet/how-many-calories-should-i-eat-per-day-to-lose-weight/>