



FAD-FREE FAT LOSS

A SENSIBLE APPROACH TO A HAPPY DIET

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THE BIG PICTURE

Fact: Calories count

Regardless of what the latest diet books or fads might suggest, the science is clear: calories do count. If you want to lose weight, you must consume slightly fewer calories than you expend (calorie *deficit*). If you want to gain weight, the opposite is true (calorie *surplus*).

You do not necessarily need to count calories in order to create a calorie deficit or surplus, nor do you need to starve yourself.

Fact: No food is fattening or slimming

No food is 'good' or 'bad'. What you eat is not a moral issue. While it can seem otherwise, no food can make you gain or lose weight all on its own. Of course some foods are more calorie dense than others, and some foods are tastier and much easier to overeat than others, but carbs, chocolate, ice-cream, beer, pizza, or anything else, can only make you gain weight if you consume more calories than you expend over a given period of time.

Letting go of your judgements and adopting a more neutral view of all foods is a key first step – especially if you've had a history of dieting or disordered eating. Food is food. As far as weight loss or weight gain is concerned, what matters is the *overall context of your diet*: the balance of energy in vs. energy out.

That being said, food quality *does* matter. To function at its best, your body requires an abundance of nutrients that come from food. Some foods are more *nutrient dense* than others. Some nutrients, like protein, are also known to be more satiating than others.

The best diet ...is the one you can follow

Rigid dieting doesn't work, nor is it necessary. If your diet isn't sustainable, nor will your results be. Diets that severely restrict calories, or that restrict foods you enjoy, are not sustainable and tend to promote restrict-binge cycles. You must be able to enjoy the foods that you love the taste of, in moderation.

Diets that are impractical or socially challenging are also unsustainable. A healthy diet is one that allows you to live and enjoy your life.

As a rough guide, respected nutrition professional, Alan Aragon, suggests the following breakdown of calories in your diet:

- 70% whole and minimally processed foods that you love the taste of.
- 10% whole and minimally processed foods that you are neutral to.
- 10% questionable semi-junk food you love the taste of.
- 10% blatant junk food that you love the taste of.

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THE BASICS

Calories

Calories (kcal) are simply the theoretical unit of measure for energy in the body. Think *energy*, not enemy. Information on calories in food or burned through exercise is, at best, an estimation (albeit a useful estimation).

Energy requirements vary considerably from person to person. We have natural signals like hunger and satiety that allow our body to communicate whether or not we need more energy. This should be a simple process that enables us to self-regulate our bodyweight over time (if we are hungry, we should eat, if not, we shouldn't).

However, our fast-paced, modern lifestyle with high stress, industrial food products and limitless food availability, coupled with our body image ideals, judgements, and beliefs about certain foods, can skew these natural signals – or our ability to read them.

To eat an appropriate amount of calories, we therefore have two options:

Mindful eating: Slow down and learn to tune into, and obey, the signals our body provides.

Tracking: Recording what we eat and aiming for estimated energy requirements.

Or we can do both. We can also adopt strategies to make this easier.

Calorie Density, Nutrient Density, Food Volume and Satiety

Calorie density: how much energy per mass of food. (e.g. peanut butter is more calorie dense than low-fat yogurt).

Nutrient density: quantity of micronutrients per absolute mass of food. (e.g. spinach is more nutrient dense than bread).

Food volume: the overall size or space taken up by food. (e.g. 4 cups of carrots is greater than 1 cup of carrots).

Satiety: How full we feel after eating a certain food or meal. (e.g. 200kcal of chicken is more satiating than 200kcal of crisps). Total calories, macronutrients, micronutrients, and overall food volume all contribute to our sense of satiety. The combination of calories, flavour hits, ease of eating, 'meltdown' and 'early hit' tends to drive cravings for more.

These concepts are important considerations when making our food choices. Vegetables, for instance, might not be seen as a filling food because of their low calorie density. However, for 200kcal of vegetables, we can eat a greater volume of food (keeping us full) as well as consume more vitamins and minerals than if we ate 200kcal of a high calorie density, low volume food like chocolate raisins ([More examples here](#)).

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Protein

Probably the most undervalued macronutrient in the average person. Amongst many other roles, protein is important for:

- 1- The preservation and growth of muscle tissue (so you burn fat instead).
- 2- Managing hunger. (Protein is more satiating than fat or carbohydrate).
- 3- Burning extra calories. (The energy cost, or thermic effect, of digestion is higher for protein than for fat or carbohydrate, meaning you can expend more calories with a higher-protein diet).

Protein dense foods include:

- Animal products: beef, fish, chicken, turkey, eggs, whey protein powder, etc.
- Dairy products: yoghurt, cheese, cottage cheese, milk.
- Beans & pulses: lentils, pinto beans, kidney beans, etc.
- Nuts & seeds: almonds, pistachios, pumpkin seeds, etc. (Best used in moderation as a snack or garnish).

Note: In nature, protein is usually paired with fat, so be aware that some protein dense foods will also be calorie-dense foods. This is where leaner, or lower-fat options can be helpful at times.

Fat

Fat plays important roles in the body such as supporting metabolism, immunity, hormone production, and the structure of our cells and our brain.

Although certain fats have historically been given a bad name, we need a balance of saturated and unsaturated fats in our diet. The simplest approach is to aim for a mix of fats from whole, minimally processed foods.

Good choices:

Omega-3 fats from oily fish (sardines, mackerel, herring, anchovies) have been shown to have various health benefits. Saturated fats (butter, ghee, coconut oil) are more chemically stable thus better for cooking at higher temperatures. Other minimally processed fats like olive oil, avocado, nuts and seeds.

Not-so-good choices:

Most shelf-stable cooking oils (vegetable, rapeseed, corn and nut oils and sprays).
Margarine.
The fats contained in highly processed industrial foods.

Note: Fat contains more calories per gram (9kcal) than protein (4kcal) and carbohydrates (4kcal) and also makes foods more palatable. Together, this makes it easy to overconsume calories when eating high-fat foods – regardless of whether or not they are seen as 'healthy' foods or not.

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Carbohydrates & Sugar

Carbohydrates and/or sugar have been cast as the big dietary enemy in recent times, taking over from the anti-fat ideas of the 1980s and 1990s. Diet trends will continually come and go but it's important to remember that, in the absence of a calorie surplus, no food is inherently fattening.

All carbohydrates are broken down to simple sugars in the body regardless of how they're consumed. The sugar is then used to provide us with energy, so in a way, all carbs and sugar can be viewed as fuel. The more fuel you expend, the greater your carbohydrate requirements, and vice versa.

The main differences in carbohydrate choice are:

- How quickly and/or easily the carbohydrate is digested and absorbed. In general, more complex, unrefined carbohydrates tend to be digested slower and have a more gradual influence on our blood sugar and energy levels, when compared with simple sugars and refined carbohydrates.
- Which other nutrients are provided in the food. Fat and protein when eaten with carbs will slow the digestive process. Some carbohydrate choices will also be more nutrient dense, providing more vitamins and minerals to support health.
- Our perceptions of the carbohydrates' texture and sweetness. Taste and personal preferences are important. Highly palatable and tasty foods also tend to be highly rewarding and easier to overeat.

Again, the simplest approach is to aim for a mix of carbohydrates prioritising whole, minimally processed, nutrient dense foods, while taking into account your personal preferences and activity levels.

Macronutrients & Micronutrients

Macronutrients are the 'big' building blocks of our diet: protein, fat, and carbohydrates. *Micronutrients* are the smaller, but no less important vitamins, minerals and other health-supporting compounds we require from our food.

Vitamins & Minerals

Vitamins, minerals, enzymes and *phytochemicals* play crucial roles in enabling us to function at our best. We need a daily supply of a variety of micronutrients from our food.

Vitamin and mineral deficiencies are common – even in developed cultures. Symptoms include nervousness, anxiety, weakness, sleeplessness, irritability, fatigue, skin problems, cracked lips, hair loss, diarrhoea, headache, softened bones, tooth decay, muscle cramps, lowered immune status and others. Deficiencies can be avoided by eating a variety of nutrient dense foods such as whole or minimally processed fruits, vegetables and animal products.

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THE FOLLOW THROUGH

How To Implement A Fat Loss Diet

We know:

- 1- We need to expend slightly more energy than we consume (i.e. create a subtle calorie deficit) – without relying on an excessive amount of exercise.
- 2- A relatively high protein diet helps us to preserve lean tissue while contributing to our sense of satiety and increasing energy expenditure via the thermic effect of digestion.
- 3- Whole and minimally processed foods like fruit, vegetables and animal products tend to be more nutrient dense, contributing to our overall health and wellbeing. These foods are also more likely to keep us full vs. drive cravings.
- 4- Willpower is limited. Attempting to restrict specific foods is unnecessary and generally unsustainable. A better approach is to practice becoming more emotionally neutral toward all foods and learning to eat the less nutritious stuff in small amounts.

Step 1: Practice Mindful Eating

Eat slowly. Pay attention to your food. Pay attention to how you feel. Notice feelings of hunger and satiety. When you start to feel satisfied, stop eating. If you feel like you want something else to eat, wait 15 minutes. If you're still hungry after that, eat the food! Remember: hunger doesn't exist to make you fat. It exists to keep you alive! If you are *genuinely* hungry, the chances are you need to eat!

Listen to your body. Junk foods are self-reinforcing: the more you eat, the more you want. But if your diet is based around nutrient dense, whole, filling foods and if you eat slowly and mindfully, it should become easier to know when to stop eating.

Step 2: Positive Nutritional Displacement

Positive nutritional displacement is just a fancy way of saying if you add in more nutrient dense, whole, filling foods, you'll have less room, and desire, for the not-so-nutritious stuff.

So rather than start like most diets do, by cutting out all of your favourite foods, start by adding in some more vegetables. The idea is to get more nourishment without the feelings of deprivation.

- 1- Add more veg (work up to 2 fist-sized portions with each meal).
- 2- Add more protein (work up to 1-2 palm-sized portions at each main meal).
- 3- Check to see if you're still eating mindfully.

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Step 3: Make Outcome-Based Adjustments

Once you've got steps 1 and 2 down: you're eating mindfully, and eating plenty of vegetables and protein, it's time to check-in and see if we need to make some adjustments. Here are a few things to check:

- Scale weight (0.5 – 1kg per week weight loss is a reasonable target).
- Body measurements (waist, hips, thigh, etc., skinfold measurements).
- Appearance (take and compare photographs – use consistent settings).
- How your jeans fit.

If you're not seeing progress, it's time to make some small adjustments. The chances are you're eating a little more and/or exercising a little less than you think. Or perhaps you're underestimating the frequency or impact of the times you overeat or consume alcohol, for instance.

If you feel everything is going ok, be patient. Wait another week and check outcomes again. If you still don't see any progress, either eat a little less food, or, if you're not already getting sufficient physical activity, try to move a little more. Remember, we want to do this in a sustainable manner – nothing extreme!

It would be also wise to subjectively rank your energy levels, sleep, appetite, and exercise performance. If these are suffering, you may need to tweak your diet. If your energy or performance is poor, it may be that you need more carbs. A general guide is to aim for 1-2 cupped handfuls of carbohydrate dense foods at each main meal, and adjust from there.

Make the adjustments, check the outcomes, and repeat. If you still see no signs of progress, move on to step four.

Step 4: Tracking

Use [MyFitnessPal](#) to record *everything* you eat for two weeks (this includes sauces, dressings and calorie-containing beverages). This exercise should help you see if/where you are overeating.

If you feel you need more clarity on how much to eat, you can estimate your BMR (Basal Metabolic Rate) and your TEE (Total Energy Expenditure). One of many different equations used to estimate BMR is [The Mifflin-St Jeor Equation](#):

For men

- $BMR = (10 \times \text{weight in kg}) + (6.25 \times \text{height in cm}) - (4.92 \times \text{age}) + 5$

For women

- $BMR = (10 \times \text{weight in kg}) + (6.25 \times \text{height in cm}) - (4.92 \times \text{age}) - 161$

Your BMR is merely the calories your body requires for basic functioning (before any physical activity). So to estimate your total energy expenditure, we must multiply your BMR by an activity factor depending on how much exercise you do.

$BMR \times \text{activity factor} = \text{your total energy expenditure (TEE)}$

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Activity factor	Activity level
1.200	Sedentary (little or no exercise)
1.375	Lightly active (light exercise/sports 1-3 days/week, approx. 590 Cal/day)
1.550	Moderately active (moderate exercise/sports 3-5 days/week, approx. 870 Cal/day)
1.725	Very active (hard exercise/sports 6-7 days a week, approx. 1150 Cal/day)
1.900	Extra active (very hard exercise/sports and physical job, approx. 1580 Cal/day)

Your Total Energy Expenditure is an estimation of the total calories you burn in a day. To lose weight, you should aim to eat 300-500kcal under your TEE.

Example:

BMR = 1700kcal (use *The Mifflin-St Jeor Equation to estimate BMR*)
Activity factor = 1.550 (for a moderately active person – see table above)
TEE = 2635kcal (1700 x 1.550)
Calorie Target = 2200kcal approx.

Second to calories, protein is the most important nutrient to track. As a guide, aim to eat around 2g of protein per kg of bodyweight. For a person weighing 70kg, that would mean around 140g of protein per day.

If you hit your calorie and protein targets, in most cases it should be ok to simply eat carbohydrates and fat to preference.

One day a week you can increase your calories to the level of your TEE, eating a little more carbs and a little less protein. Again, check outcomes and make adjustments accordingly. 0.5 – 1kg per week is a reasonable weight loss target.

Step 5: Repeat

Repeat the entire process. Are you eating slowly and mindfully and listening to your body? Are you eating plenty of vegetables, protein dense foods and enough carbohydrates to support your energy needs?

Have to looked at outcomes and tweaked things accordingly? Do you need to track things a little more closely for a couple of weeks?

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STRATEGIES & TROUBLESHOOTING

Systems & Habits

Willpower is limited. If you have to rely on willpower to consistently make helpful choices, you're fighting a losing battle. Instead, we need to form the habit of eating well and being physically active.

The question is... how can we practice these fundamentals on a consistent basis without taxing our willpower reserves or succumbing to the 'Resistance' that does everything to keep us from becoming our best selves?

The answer: systems and habits. When we have a system of doing something, it's more likely to become automatic. Something triggers the behaviour and '*click-whirr*', our brain plays the tape that runs the necessary routine, and we get our outcome or reward.

Trigger, routine, *reward*.

You get in your car in the morning (trigger), you drive to work – usually without effort or thought about the process (routine), and you get to your destination (reward).

- 1- Identify your biggest limiting factor. What system can you put in place to help you overcome it? What will trigger the behaviour? What is the behaviour? What is the immediate reward you will get?
- 2- Choose one thing and track your habit for 30 days. Start with something really, really easy (as not to tax willpower). Make sure you have a trigger, a routine, and a reward. Track whether or not you do it (by checking off days on a calendar, for instance). This is important. It's so easy to fool ourselves. Research suggests that if you can keep it going with consistency for 66 days you're more likely to form the habit.

Systems aren't always daily habits as such. Systems could be built around food shopping, cooking or meal prep. Or your morning or evening routine. Or your workout scheduling.

What simple habit, system or strategy could you implement that will move you closer to your goal?

Moderation

The scarcity principle says that if something is limited, we perceive it to be more valuable. This happens all the time with food. We ban certain foods then inevitably binge on them. Moderation isn't an excuse to eat junk food all the time, it simply means leaving room for a small amount of less nutritious foods that we love. When we realise that chocolate can be enjoyed in moderation, we might find it loses its power over us.

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What About...?

- **Eating frequent small meals vs. eating 3 larger meals?**

The most important thing is that you eat an appropriate amount of food for your goal. Whether or not you eat one or eight meals a day is best left to personal preference. Do what works for you.

- **Food timing?**

As above, calorie balance is more important than food timing. Eating an appropriate amount of nutrient dense food, over a day, week or month is the priority.

Eating breakfast: This comes down to personal preference. Breakfast is a great start to reaching your nutrient requirements ...but not absolutely crucial if you get those nutrients in at other times. Note that the body is highly adaptive. If you don't consider yourself a 'breakfast person', you can condition your appetite by practising eating something small in the mornings. In as little as two weeks you may find that you've become a breakfast person after all.

Eating before and after exercise: To ensure you're well fuelled and get the best out of your exercise sessions, it would be smart to eat something an hour or two before working out – taking into account the type of exercise you're going to do as well as your personal preferences and tolerances to food around exercise. Eating within a couple of hours afterwards is good practice but probably not critical if you eat well overall.

Eating late at night: If eating late at night suits you, and if it doesn't negatively impact your sleep, don't worry about it.

- **Diet drinks?**

Diet drinks offer little to no nutritional value. However, if you have a fizzy drink habit, choosing diet drinks is a helpful first step in reducing calories compared to drinking the non-diet variety.

- **Gluten?**

A very small percentage of the population have an allergy to gluten known as coeliac disease. If this is you, it's very important that you avoid gluten. If not, it's unlikely that you need to avoid gluten. (Note: it's possible that non-coeliac-gluten-sensitivity may exist in a very small part of the population).

- **Superfoods?**

You should aim for a variety of nutrient dense fruits, vegetables and herbs and spices. While they may have value, don't expect so-called 'superfoods' like chia, goji berries, spirulina, flax, or anything else, to be the missing link in your diet.

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Useful questions to ask

- **What is my biggest limiting factor?**

What is the single biggest thing that is holding you back from your goals? Is it late-night snacking, bingeing, alcohol, poor sleep, stress, inactivity or something else? Find it, and set up a very easy habit that will get you started in making an improvement.

- **Am I hungry?**

Do I genuinely need to eat right now? If yes, eat the food! Perhaps you're merely eating out of habit, boredom, distraction or availability. Could you make a more helpful choice?

- **If I could eat anything right now, what would I have?**

This helps us tune into our body's needs. Sometimes you might find you crave fruit or salad, other times you'll want something heartier like meat. Perhaps you need carbs. This is known as intuitive eating. Practice listening to your body.

- **Will this food offer nourishment or stimulation?**

It's ok to eat some highly palatable, stimulating food – if that's what you want right now. Remember, no food is off-limits, in moderation. But routinely choosing stimulation over nourishment will make it harder for you to eat an appropriate amount of calories.

- **How much more is it going to take to make me happy and satisfied?**

If you find yourself picking at food and going back for more and more, ask, how much more is it going to take? Will you have to eat the whole bag? How will you feel afterwards?

- **Is it worth the calories?**

Is this going to be a great food experience? When choosing some less nutritious, stimulating, calorie dense food, make it worth it. Granny's freshly baked, homemade cookies are probably way tastier than some mediocre, stale, store-bought biscuit. Sweets and treats and suchlike can seem so appealing but are often a let-down. If it's not going to be awesome, ask: is it worth the calories?

- **Am I really eating an appropriate amount?**

A large percentage of people eat more than they think. Those with "higher social desirability" and "greater eating restraint" are most likely to under-report their food intake. Having a history of dieting, and being overweight are also associated. Women are more likely than men, and active people are more likely than inactive, when it comes to under-reporting. (For more on portion size guidelines, [click here](#).)

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SUPPLEMENTS

What sells and what works is not the same thing and, unfortunately, the fitness and nutrition industry is full of questionable claims and quick-fix solutions.

There is no quick fix or trick or shortcut to long-lasting, sustainable results. It's not sexy, but it is simply about practicing the fundamentals, with consistency, over a long time. Be patient. ...We all agree that time flies anyway!

That being said, there are a few basic supplements that you might find helpful:

Protein Powder

Protein powders are versatile and portable and offer a convenient way to help you meet your protein requirements.

Other than that, there is nothing special about them. Choose a basic whey protein from a reputable brand. Apart from some flavouring (if desired), you don't need other substances in there. Whey protein 'isolate' tends to be finer and of higher quality than whey protein 'concentrate' and might be a better choice if you have digestive issues.

Multivitamins

If your diet is low on fruit and vegetables, there may be value in supplementing with a multivitamin to 'plug the gaps' until you make some improvements.

Fish Oil

Fish oil provides a variety of benefits when supplemented, and may be worth considering if you do not frequently consume oily fish. ([More info at Examine.com](#)).

Vitamin D

We synthesise Vitamin D from exposure to sunshine. Due to the many health benefits of Vitamin D, supplementation is encouraged if optimal levels are not present in the body. For moderate supplementation, a 1000-2000IU dose of vitamin D3 is sufficient to meet the needs of most of the population and should be considered during the winter months. ([More info at Examine.com](#)). Caution: Doses should not exceed 10,000IU daily.

Creatine Monohydrate

Creatine is a well-researched and inexpensive supplement that can help enhance muscular strength and power. It is a substance that naturally occurs in the body and can be supplemented with 5g per day. ([More info at Examine.com](#)).

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USEFUL READING

Health & Nutrition

Energy Is Everything: Mindset, Nutrition and Exercise for the best version of you
The End Of Overeating
Mindless Eating

Behaviour Change

The War of Art
The Power Of Habit
Switch: How to change things when change is hard
The Willpower Instinct

Other

How To Want What You Have
Mindset

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Mike is a former Freelance Nutrition Consultant to the first team at Glasgow Rangers FC, and a former semi-professional sportsman himself. His book, *Energy Is Everything: Mindset, Nutrition and Exercise for the best version of you*, is available on Amazon.

Always Keep Reaching!

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