



Helen to The Rescue

The Calorie Fallacy

BY HELEN PUFAHL, RESIDENT CONTRIBUTOR

MOST OF US have been taught that losing weight is a matter of simple math. Cut calories, precisely 3,500, and you'll lose a pound. However, we are learning that this decades-old strategy is very misguided. It's not only antiquated but also wrong!

How your body burns calories depends on several factors, including the type of food you eat, your metabolism, and the organisms (bacteria) in your gut. Some gut bacteria are efficient at pulling energy from food, and some are not so efficient! Eating the same number of calories as someone else can have very different outcomes regarding your weight.

CALORIES, THE ENERGY IN FOOD?

Your body constantly needs energy to fuel everyday actions. Carbohydrates, fats, and proteins are the nutrients that contain calories and are the primary energy sources for your body. The calories are either converted to physical energy or stored within your body as fat.

Stored calories (fat) will stay in your body unless you cut the number of calories you take in, so your body must draw on reserves for energy. More physical activity will burn more calories. Aim to get at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise each week.

HOW ARE CALORIES CALCULATED?

A bomb calorimeter (I'm not making this up) is a machine that blows up or burns food and determines the number of calories released by measuring a change in water temperature. A calorie is simply a unit of energy that represents the energy needed to raise a gram of water 1 degree Celsius.

We don't blow up or burn the food in our belly (although it might feel that way after some meals)! Our body breaks food down bit by bit as it goes through our digestive tract until, eventually, it is in units small enough to absorb through the intestinal wall. There, they are converted to energy through a super exciting metabolic process (that I shall not bore you with).

EATING COSTS CALORIES

Ever wonder how celery has negative calories? It takes more energy to break down and absorb celery than it contains.

Calories are used to chew, swallow, churn the stomach, make the acid in the stomach, and make the enzymes to make the rhythmic muscular contractions known as peristalsis that drive the food through. On average, a person uses about 10% of their daily energy expenditure digesting and absorbing food, but this percentage changes depending on the type of food you eat.

Protein requires the most energy to digest (20-30% of the total calories in protein eaten go to digesting it), followed by Carbohydrates (5-10%) and then fat (0-3%).

Hmm. Maybe "Not all calories are created equal."

Yours in Fitness,



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Helen's love of fitness began at an early age. She practiced dance and gymnastics as well as track and field. She's an Exercise Physiologist with over 35 years of experience. She is also a certified personal trainer, corrective exercise specialist, nutrition consultant and Senior fitness specialist.

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