

## Skip the Diet and Develop a Nutrition Plan

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Nutrition has played a significant role in your life, even from before you were born. And it will continue to impact you in numerous ways for as long as you live.

Proper nutrition, combined with an exercise program consisting of muscle strengthening, cardiovascular endurance training, and increased flexibility, can help you live a longer and healthier life.

As with most things in life, nutrition is all about choices. Several times each day you make food choices which either benefit your health or harm your health. A steady pattern of good choices is the easiest and most effective method for achieving and maintaining a healthy weight and ideal body composition.

But how do you know what choices to make? Especially when you're under a constant barrage of new diets and ever-changing information from the multi-billion dollar diet industry.

First, you need to look at the number of calories you must take in to maintain your current body weight, or your maintenance calories. Most people need approximately 2000 to 2500 kcalories per day to maintain their current weight. Remember that this is just a rough number and is affected by a variety of factors.

For instance, athletic teenagers often require about 4000 kcalories per day to maintain their weight and endurance athletes and body builders can require 7000 kcalories or more per day.

While I was training sled dogs for the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race, we provided between 10,000 and 15,000 calories per day for each forty-five to fifty-five pound dog during the race. This shows you how calorie requirements rise dramatically as your activity level increases.

Now you may never run a 1200 mile race through Alaska in the middle of winter but if you can increase your caloric expenditure by 250 kcalories per day you can lose about one pound every two weeks. Combine that with a reduction in your caloric intake of 500 kcalories per day and you increase your weight loss to over six pounds per month.

The more you burn in relation to what you take in, the more weight you'll lose. Conversely, if you're looking to gain weight you must make sure you take in more calories than you are spending.

But where do you get these calories and how many calories do you get from the nutrients in the food you're consuming?

For the most part, your calories come from three sources: proteins, carbohydrates, and fats. Each gram of protein or carbohydrate you consume provides you with four kcalories while each gram of fat you consume provides you with nine kcalories.

Most of the foods you eat contain a mixture of these energy-yielding nutrients, as well as water and other nutrients and substances. Therefore, it is inaccurate to label foods for their predominant nutrient, such as calling meat a protein or pasta a carbohydrate. Meat and pasta are foods that are rich in these nutrients. Meat can also have a high water and fat content and is rich in certain vitamins and minerals while pasta contains some fat, protein, vitamins and minerals as well as carbohydrates.

Only a few foods derive their calories from just one of these nutrient sources. Sugar is almost pure carbohydrate and oil is almost pure fat.

Whether you get your calories from proteins, carbohydrates, or fats, your body utilizes the derived energy to fuel its activities. If provided with an excess of any of these three energy-yielding nutrients, it rearranges them and stores them, mostly as fat, for use between meals. When this storage exceeds the requirements of your physical activity you gain weight as fat. This will happen regardless of whether the extra calories come from proteins, carbohydrates, or fats.

Now with an understanding of where your energy, or calories, comes from, you can devise a nutrition plan that fits into your individual lifestyle.

Remember that “diets” are short-term modifications to your nutrition plan that are meant to achieve certain results. The overall goal is to establish a nutrition plan that will become a part of your health and fitness regime for the rest of your life. To do this effectively, you must incorporate two basic principles when making your daily food choices: moderation and variety.

Moderation simply means not consuming any of the calorie providers in excess. A balanced intake where roughly half of your calories come from carbohydrates and one-quarter of your calories come from both proteins and fats provides the moderation that works for most people and is sustainable for most lifestyles.

Variety in the foods you eat is important for several reasons. First, it prevents you from getting bored with your nutrition plan and reverting to old, sometimes unhealthy, eating habits. Second, it helps to ensure that all the necessary mineral and vitamin requirements are met on a regular basis. Third, it prevents you from consuming too much of any food which may contain hidden contaminants or harmful substances.

Finally, in addition to incorporating moderation and variety, selecting nutrient dense foods, consuming many small meals per day, learning to read labels, and periodically keeping a journal of the foods you eat will go a long way toward realizing your goal of maintaining a healthy nutrition plan.

So forget the diets and develop a plan for lifelong nutrition that works for you. Remember that the choices you make today will impact your health and happiness throughout the rest of your life.