

Why Counting Calories Doesn't Work

Many of us are still going strong with our New Year's resolution to lose those extra pounds, but we need to be smart in our decisions. We can get caught in the same trap, seeking out the "usual suspects" when we start a weight-loss program. The typical school of thought for losing weight is a matter of burning more calories than we eat. Unfortunately, that's not how it works!

There are too many people who are stuck on their same weight, even though they have been eating right and exercising. The reason is simple: They are not taking into consideration how stress and the hormones they produce control their metabolism.

Not All Calories Are the Same

We would like to think that when we burn calories, we are burning calories from stored body fat from around our waist and bottom. That simply is not always the case. The body burns calories from either fats, carbohydrates or proteins (lean muscle). To assume that the body is always burning calories from stored body fat is simply wrong.

It's easy to say that a 30-minute jog burned 300 calories, but it doesn't tell us if we burned 300 calories from the breakdown of fats, carbs or muscle. We could have easily burned 300 calories from the breakdown of carbohydrates—or worse, we could have burned 300 calories from lean muscle tissue (protein), which is the last thing we want to do.

The body is designed to burn calories throughout the day from fats, as opposed to carbs and proteins. But most people who struggle with their weight are usually burning more calories from the breakdown of carbs and proteins, not fats. In other words, they are not staying in their "fat-burning zone"

throughout the day. Yes, they are burning lots of calories, but they're not burning calories from stored body fat. It doesn't matter if you don't have any carbs in your system. Your body will then break down lean muscle.

The reason people aren't efficiently burning stored body fat has nothing to do with the amount of calories they ate or burned. It has more to do with what regulates their metabolism.

Hormones Regulate Metabolism

As we said before, the body can either burn calories from fats, proteins or carbs. Our metabolism is predominately controlled by our hormones. Some hormones burn fats, some hormones store fats, and some trigger our body to burn carbs and protein. So to automatically assume that the 300 calories you burned came from the stored body fat around your tummy and bottom is wrong.

The hormones we are talking about are cortisol, adrenaline, insulin and glucagon, which are stimulated by stress and diet. Too much stress in your life will cause an overproduction of cortisol and adrenaline, which can trigger your body to burn carbs and proteins instead of fats. The same is true about insulin and glucagon. Too many carbs, and you produce more insulin, which stores fat, whereas glucagon burns fat and is produced when you eat protein.

The Calorie-Burning Test

So, how can you tell if you are burning carbs instead of fats throughout the day?

1. Do you struggle with cravings and low blood sugar?
2. Are you irritable if meals are missed or delayed?
3. Do you skip meals or only eat one or two meals a day?
4. Do you eat lots of refined, processed food and drink?
5. Do you have a hard time concentrating and staying

focused?

6. Do you struggle with midmorning/afternoon slumps?
7. Do you have difficulty “staying” asleep?
8. Do you have to eat every few hours?

If you answered yes to a few of these questions, it is a good indication your body is constantly burning calories from carbohydrates and proteins instead of stored body fats.

Stay in Your Fat-Burning Zone

Here are some simple steps you can take to ensure your body is staying in its fat-burning zone throughout the day.

1. Examine the amount of stress in your life. If stress is constant, you could be producing too much cortisol and adrenaline, which is throwing your metabolism off. Take our online health quiz to see if stress is a problem. If you want to be more scientific, have your cortisol and DHEA levels measured through a saliva test to determine if stress is impacting your metabolism. FYI: Not everyone's cortisol is too high! Many people under long-term stress make too little cortisol and adrenaline, which is referred to as adrenal exhaustion.

2. Take a look at your diet. You cannot skip meals or eat refined junk food. It causes your blood sugar to drop and stimulates your adrenals to make additional cortisol and adrenaline.

3. Make sure you eat breakfast and that it includes good protein and fats. A predominantly high-carb breakfast, like cereal or bagels, will throw your blood sugar off for most of the day. Good protein and fats at each meal will help reduce the surge of insulin and will stimulate the production of glucagon, which aids in the breakdown of fats.

4. Check your digestion. If you struggle with bloating, gas, indigestion, heartburn or other irritable bowel problems, it

is causing irritation and inflammation. This triggers further production of cortisol. Therefore, add some digestive enzymes, look at food combining and consider possible “hidden” food allergies.

Deep breathing exercises for one to two minutes or longer throughout the day can lower cortisol and adrenaline. This is important because the more cortisol and adrenaline you produce, the more insulin you produce. It’s a vicious cycle because cortisol makes your body resistant to insulin, which in turn causes even more insulin to be produced.

Playing the calorie counting game doesn’t work. It overlooks and ignores the impact stress and diet have on your hormones. Remember, the good Lord didn’t design a bad hormone. Cortisol and insulin are not bad for you, but if you overproduce them, they throw all the other hormones out of whack.

Dr. Len Lopez is a nutrition and fitness expert and creator of *The Work Horse Trainer*. He speaks extensively on diet, exercise and how stress can affect your overall health and wellness.

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