



# Understanding calories



**Health**



**Wellness**



**Nutrition**



**Support**

# Introduction

'Energy in versus energy out' is the basic understanding of our body's energy needs. Too much energy In and we gain weight, too little and we can lose weight.

This is factually correct, yet In the UK many of us still battle on a daily basis to manage our body weight... so is it really that simple?

Different foods and drinks provide different amounts of energy for our body. How active we are, our gender, age and a range of other factors will affect how much energy we need and use in a day.

But not all calories are created equal. The type of food and drink we consume, and how they were made, will all affect how many calories your body actually uses.

Food is made up of nutrients, vitamins and minerals and we need consider the types of food we eat, not just the number of calories In them.

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## What is a calorie?

A calorie is the unit we use to measure energy for our body.

You will have no doubt heard or read about calories. They are on food labels and often form the basic advice we are given to manage our health.

You may have seen different words like calories or kilocalories (kcal). These two terms actually refer to the same measurement.

Kilojoules (or KJ) is also used in some places. This is just another way of measuring energy.

In this booklet we will use the word calories when talking about energy as it is more common to us here in the UK.

## What affects the number of calories in food?

When looking at food labels, you'll most often see 'kcal'. This is the number of calories in that food or drink.

Foods that are high in fat are often high in calories because fat contains more energy compared to carbohydrates. This **does not** mean that this food and drink should be avoided. Foods such as butter, oil, nuts, eggs, dairy and red meat can provide essential nutrients as part of a balanced diet, even though their calorie content is higher.

Processed foods that are deep fried or have a high sugar content such as cakes and biscuits all have high calorie content because of the way they are made.

When meals and snacks are made in a factory, a lot of the nutrients we need are taken out and replaced with cheap, high calorie substitutes. While we find them tasty, they do not benefit our health.

Equally, some food and drinks are very low or zero calorie. These foods have often had replacement products added. For example, sugary drinks have had the sugar content replaced by sweeteners. This does not make the product healthier, it just means it is lower in calories.

When looking to manage your health, a basic principle we need to consider is reducing overall calorie intake.

It will come as no surprise that choosing foods which are lower in calories, and eating less of the foods which are high in calories, can help control your overall calorie intake.



## Energy balance

As a guide, men should aim to eat 2,500kcal per day and women should eat 2,000kcal per day.

These are general guidelines, however, and do not consider your age and activity levels which are important factors in energy needs.

You can calculate your recommended Intake using BBC Food's free calorie counter: [https://www.bbc.co.uk/food/articles/how\\_many\\_calories\\_do\\_you\\_need](https://www.bbc.co.uk/food/articles/how_many_calories_do_you_need)

Simple swaps can make a difference. The table below compares two example days and the calories they contain:

High Energy Day		Lower Energy Day	
Bacon and egg sandwich on white bread with butter	568 kcals	Boiled egg on wholegrain toast and tomatoes	488 kcals
Cheese and onion sandwich (shop bought), crisps and diet fizzy drink	643 kcals	Tuna and sweetcorn sandwich with vegetable sticks	430 kcals
Chocolate bar	180 kcals	Plain yoghurt with berries	191 kcals
Ready-made lasagna with garlic bread	745 kcals	Homemade lasagna with broccoli	668 kcals
Two pints of beer and salted nuts	594 kcals	Dark chocolate and unsalted nuts	292 kcals
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>2730 kcals</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>2069 kcals</b>

Regularly choosing foods that have high numbers of calories can mean that you eat more calories than you use up. Our body can only store additional energy as fat, so any extra calories you take but don't use are converted and stored as fat instead.

Over a single day or full week, we do not see the impact of these extra calories. But, after a few months, we can suddenly realise our clothes are tighter fitting and our body shape has started to change. This is because the extra calories have been stored as fat.

But one important question still exists. Is it really that simple? And if it is, why do we find it so hard to lower our body fat levels and maintain them?

## Is it really that simple?

### Low calorie diets

It makes sense that if we eat fewer calories than our body needs each day, we should lose weight. This is the basis of nearly every diet plan that exists. Whatever the diet plan's specific method, they are ultimately trying to get you to eat less - either by choosing more filling foods such as those that contain protein, by eliminating some food groups entirely, or by choosing overall lower calorie food with point systems.

Every single diet, if followed effectively, will work because they aim to create a negative energy balance. Regardless of which diet plan you follow, weight gain usually occurs again after six months.

## Why can't we keep the weight off?

Diet plans work for weight loss for up to 6 months. Unless you are then able to stick to that plan long-term, previous eating habits can come back and we can easily regain weight.

The truth is we can become addicted to calorie counting without truly understand the types of food and drink we are eating, and there's lots of evidence to suggest that this is bad for our mental health if we focus too much on just counting every week.

Food and drink are not just numbers, they contain different tastes and textures. Some give us pleasure and mealtimes should be an enjoyable part of our day.

As with calorie counting, focusing on your weight on the scales makes everything a numbers game and, as soon as something goes the wrong way, we see this as failure - and this often leads us to giving up or 'yo-yo dieting'.

## The truth about calories

### Are food labels accurate?

Food labels are a guide. They are not completely accurate, but they do give us a good understanding of how much energy we *could* get from that food or drink.

### Are all calories the same?

The simple answer is no.

The type of food you eat and the way it has been prepared will affect how many calories your body can digest and use.

A good example is to compare 100kcal of sweetcorn, a 100kcal corn tortilla and 100kcal of sugar. All three foods contain carbohydrates and therefore will be broken down into glucose in our body. However, the more natural the product is, the less we are likely to digest and the harder our body works to get the calories out of the food.

- **100 kcal of sweetcorn** is a natural food. There is some processing involved to get it to a supermarket shelf, but it's as close to natural as most of us can get access to. Our body has to work harder to digest the sweetcorn and extract the calories, and because sweetcorn contains a form of fibre that cannot be broken down, we would not be able to get 100 kcal from sweetcorn.



- **100 kcals of a corn tortilla** Is made from sweetcorn as well as other Ingredients. Because the corn has been processed into another food product, some of the energy has already been released. This means It Is easier for our bodies to digest and use the calories from the sweetcorn. But we would not likely get all 100 kcals entering our body for use as energy.
- **100 kcals of sugar** is a refined, processed product. Sugar Is digested quickly and enters our bloodstream fast meaning we probably do get nearly all of the 100 kcals It contains.

This example shows that the more refined or processed a food is, the more likely we are to extract all the calories and have a higher calorie diet. We are also going to find it easier to overeat processed and refined foods. By choosing more natural foods, the calories will react differently in our bodies and we should take In fewer calories.

Other examples of differences include:

- Fresh fruit will digest slower than fruit juice
- Homemade meals from fresh ingredients will digest and breakdown slower than shop bought ready-made foods

With this knowledge, calorie counting really becomes guess work and more useful as a guide for refined, pre-packaged and ready-made meals.

## Does low or zero calorie mean healthy?

Foods with lower calories are often labelled as the healthier options. But low calorie does not always mean healthy.

### Fizzy drinks

'Zero' or 'diet' products have replaced the sugar with sweeteners for taste. This provides a better choice as sugar can cause dental Issues and additional calories. However, sweeteners are not a recommended replacement to support a healthy weight.

### Low calorie, low fat foods

Some foods can be labelled as 'low calorie' or low fat'. When fat Is reduced or replaced In a food there Is often a replacement product added with sugars, syrups or sweeteners.

Because carbohydrates and sugar contain fewer calories per gram, this reduces the calories and fat levels but does not always make the product healthier.

For example: natural yoghurt can be bought with lower fat, but always check the label to see If other Ingredients have been added.



## Put an end to calorie counting

Just because a food is high calorie does not mean it is unhealthy. Likewise, a low calorie food is not always a healthy one. Most food types have a place in our diets for specific purposes, meeting our bodily needs.

A good quality food or drink will not have lots of added ingredients or processing. The closer to natural the better. Consider meals and food types based on quality rather than calories, and think about how they help you achieve the recommended balance of food types. A nutritionally 'quality' food supports a healthy diet by promoting fullness, reducing cravings and improving quality of life.

If you feel you need to get control of your food and calories, there are a lot of apps and tools to help you count. But instead of making this a habit, try counting your calories for 3-5 days, make some changes to your diet, and then count them again after 4-6 weeks. This way you will not become reliant on counting calories and will instead be able to focus on the types of foods you are choosing.

## Further support

If you are finding it hard to move away from calorie counting, or having difficulty with your eating patterns, thoughts and feelings towards food, help is available by visiting <https://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk/get-information-and-support/get-help-for-myself/i-need-support-now/helplines/>

If you would like to learn more or require more information and support, please get in touch!

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