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How to eat 3000 calories a day and lose weight

When you start a diet, determining how much to eat can feel a bit like playing calorie roulette. Many people turn to a calorie calculator, but they can greatly overestimate the amount of food that you need to lose weight. Here's how to calculate your own target.Fat loss relies on one thing: eating fewer calories than you expend. But nobody wants to sit and...Read moreStep One: Find Your "Caloric Maintenance"Weight loss revolves around the concept of calories. Simply put, a calorie is a unit of energy. You expend calories as you go about your daily life doing everything from exercising to simply breathing and staying alive. You consume calories when you eat or drink calorie-containing foods.From a broad perspective, the basics of weight loss and weight gain are straightforward: when you eat more calories than you use (in which case you're in a "caloric surplus") you gain weight. Conversely, when you use more calories than you eat (in which case you're in a "caloric deficit") you lose weight. So, in order to stay the same weight, you want to find your "caloric maintenance": The area where the calories you consume equal the calories you use.There are two ways that you can determine your caloric maintenance. The first is a calorie calculator. However, if you've used calorie calculators before, you may have noticed that they can grossly overestimate the amount of calories that you need to eat daily in order to lose weight. This is partially because they don't take into account the amount of muscle—or lean body mass—that you currently have.An individual with more lean body mass will have a higher caloric maintenance than someone with less lean body mass, all other things being equal. I recommend the exrx calculator, which is more accurate than most calculators since it includes "lean body mass." So, for best results, be sure to input your approximate body fat percentage. If you don't know yours, you can figure it out by using Leigh Peele's guide here. Alternatively, you can also use these handy lookup tables that I modeled from client data. While this lookup table is surprisingly accurate for only requiring one measurement, they should only be used as a rule of thumb.Lookup Table for MenWaist (inches)Approximate Body Fat Percentage255%266%277%288%299%3010%3111%3213%3315%3417%3519%3621%3723%3826%3929%4031%4134%4236%4339%4442%4544%4646%4748%4850%4952%5054% Lookup Table for WomenWaist (inches)Approximate Body Fat Percentage2515%2615%2716%2817%2918%3021%3123%3226%3328%3431%3534%3637%3740%3843%3946%4048%4151%4253%4356%4458%4560%4662%4763%4865%4966%5067%The second method is to log what you eat over the course of a few days using your favorite nutritional tracker. The caveat here is that the very act of writing down what you eat will change your actions, but do your best to eat normally. If you've been losing or gaining weight recently, then your calorie log might not be the best method of predicting your caloric "maintenance," since you might have been in a caloric surplus or deficit.In fact, you can use both methods to make a reasonable guess—just average the two numbers together. If you feel that you've done a poor job mimicking your diet over the past few days of logging, err closer towards the calculator. On the other hand, if you feel like you've done an excellent job and the calculator is off, err towards your logged averages.Step Two: Set Your Protein and Caloric TargetsNow comes the easy part. Once you figure out your caloric maintenance, it's time to calculate two things: the amount of protein and the number of calories that you'll be eating. Protein is important, because it will allow you to keep your lean body mass (and thus your metabolism) high in a caloric deficit. It's also the macronutrient that will keep you the most satiated while you're dieting.Take your maintenance calories from the previous step and subtract 20% from it. That will be the number of calories you'll be targeting each day. For example, if your maintenance is 2,000 calories, you'll be aiming to eat about 1,600 calories. You don't have to hit 1,600 on the dot every day, a margin of error of 5% or so is fine (so, in this example, that's anywhere between 1,520 to 1,680 calories per day).Next, we'll use nutritionist Alan Aragon's method to figure out your protein target. Decide your goal weight and strive to eat that amount in grams of protein. For example, if you currently weigh 200 pounds and want to eventually weigh 130, consume 130 grams of protein daily. If you're not used to eating protein, then you might not be able to hit this amount at first. Do your best, and hit it as closely as possible. If you don't mind supplements, adding whey or casein protein may help you reach this number.By the end of this process, you'll have all of your necessary targets to begin your diet. This doesn't mean automatic success, obviously. It will be important to be both mindful and flexible during your diet, as well as develop all of the necessary skills for success. Having a solid set of calorie and protein targets, however, will do wonders for starting you off on the right foot.Images by openclips, epsos, Michell Joyce, and 16:9clue.Vitals is a new blog from Lifehacker all about health and fitness. Follow us on Twitter here. Now that January is well underway and new year resolutions have been made, many of us are vowing to save more money, get enough sleep, and, you guessed it, get healthier or feel better by losing some weight. Shedding extra pounds is always a top resolution shared by millions of people. If it's yours too, one question is likely running through your mind: How many calories should I actually take in every day if my goal is to lose weight? On average, a moderately active woman between ages 26 and 50 should take in about 2,000 calories per day to maintain a healthy weight, according to the USDA's Dietary Guidelines for Americans. But when it comes to weight loss, calories aren't a one-size-fits-all thing. How many to consume depends on factors like your age, height, sex, and activity level. If you've Googled this question, you've probably seen weight loss websites or apps that use a formula taking these variables into account. After you've entered your personal data, voila—it spits back the magic number of calories you need daily to reach your desired healthy weight. Sound too good to be true? Health contributing nutrition editor Cynthia Sass says it probably is. RELATED: The Best (and Worst) Diets of 2020. According to Experts When you sign up with a weight-loss app like MyFitnessPal, for example, you'll be asked a number of specific questions to help the app set goals for you: your current weight, height, goal weight, sex, age, activity level, and the speed at which you want to lose weight (anywhere from one half to two pounds per week). Sass says most of these apps use a formula that calculates the number of calories you need to maintain your current weight, and then it subtracts 500 calories per day if you want to lose one pound per week (or subtracts 1,000 per day if you want to lose two pounds per week). If you think that sounds like a huge number of calories will be cut from your daily meal plan, you're right. "The problem is that it will reduce calories below what is needed for someone to achieve and stay at their ideal weight," she explains. The idea behind this formula is that 3,500 calories equals one pound, meaning if you cut 500 calories each day for seven days, you'll create a 3,500 calorie deficit and, in turn, lose one pound. "There are all kinds of problems with that," says Sass. "If you take someone below the number of calories needed to get to their healthy weight or their goal weight, they may slow down their metabolism, lose muscle tissue or lean tissue, and have other side effects, like intense cravings or hunger, irritability, mood swings." RELATED: 8 Foods You Need in Your Kitchen for a Healthier New Year So how can you determine how many calories you actually need to lose weight without hurting your health? Sass has a hack: Instead of entering your current weight and your goal weight into the app or formula, enter your goal weight in the box that asks for your current weight, and check "maintain current weight" as your goal instead of "lose one pound per week." For example, if you weigh 150 pounds but you want to weigh 130, enter your current weight as 130, and your goal as "maintain current weight." "That will give you the number of calories needed to get to and stay at 130," she says, "and you'll never undercut your needs or create all of those other side effects." We tried this approach on MyFitnessPal, first entering a 150-pound current weight and a 130-pound goal weight for a 35-year-old, lightly active woman who exercises four times a week for 60 minutes per session. We marked her goal as "lose 1 pound per week." The app then suggested she eat 1,400 calories per day to reach her goal. Next, we entered the same information, but we said the woman's current weight was 130 pounds and her goal was to "maintain current weight." Her daily calorie allowance came out to 1,780. That's a huge difference. RELATED: 11 New Year's Resolutions for Body Acceptance Sure, this approach will have you losing weight a little slower than if you were cutting 500 calories per day, but it's unlikely you'll mess up your metabolism, burn muscle, or experience mood changes like irritability. Plus, cutting 500 calories per day isn't sustainable for most people. You'll likely get so hungry or fatigued at some point, you'll have to increase your calorie intake, which could make you gain the weight right back. Though consuming the number of calories needed to maintain your goal weight is Sass's preferred method when it comes to tracking your intake, she's adamant that counting calories isn't for everyone. "You have to know your personality," she says. "Some people are very data driven, and they like using numbers and trackers, and they can simply look at that as data. For people who have a more emotional relationship with their bodies and numbers and feel anxiety around counting, it can actually be overwhelming." Never force yourself to track calories if it stresses you out. Sass says it could end up being counterproductive and drive you to overeat out of frustration or totally give up on your goal. When it becomes all-consuming, it can even trigger a surge in levels of the stress hormone cortisol, which has been shown to increase belly fat, she adds. Luckily, if tracking your food intake isn't your thing, there are plenty of other ways to reduce your calorie intake, such as focusing on portion size instead of calories. For example, increasing your portions of non-starchy veggies, like spinach, broccoli, and mushrooms while decreasing your portions of starchy, simple carb foods (think white bread or pasta), will automatically reduce your calorie intake. Sass says. Some people might also want to try using a tracker just at the beginning to get a feel for what it would be like to eat a healthy number of calories for their goal weight. Sass says she's had patients who didn't think they were overeating, but in reality they were 400 or 500 calories over where they needed to be. One more thing to remember: Not all calories are created equal. If you're hitting your daily calorie goal but you're eating fast food all day every day, you might lose some weight, but you won't feel good doing it. If you want to lose weight, whole foods are the way to go. Credit: Getty The right nutrition and three squares a day will help you lose fat fast! Credit: Getty Ashley Koff, R.D., author of Mom Energy, has a simple philosophy to melt off the pounds—that you should eat the right amount of nutrients at each "eating occasion"(that's Koff-speak for three meals and one snack a day). To make it easier, follow Koff's six pound-melting tactics. Advertisement Advertisement Credit: Getty Make sure to down food within 45 minutes of waking up. "The reality is, until you eat, you are in fat storage mode," Koff says. "When you put nutrients into your body, you go into fat-burning mode." To that end, try to have your last meal at least three hours before going to bed. "We want the body to finish digestion before sleep so you can get optimum weight loss and energy benefits," Koff notes. Credit: Getty Nosh about every three to four hours to keep the body operating at its highest fat-burning levels. Eating a balance of nutrients in the proper amount will keep you satisfied, she says. Advertisement Credit: Getty Having a single serving size is key to shedding pounds, but it's easy to blow it. So you want to make it simple: Pre-portion foods as much as possible. And keep too-tempting bulk items—we're talking about you, tub of ice cream!—out of the house when possible. If you go out for ice cream, "order the kiddie cup and you're practicing portion control," Koff says. "And then you don't run into the issue of 'I'm gonna have another scoop' two hours later." Credit: Getty Besides helping you feel full, Koff says, "water allows your metabolism to work at optimum levels. Don't wait until you're thirsty to reach for the water bottle." On waking, try to drink at least 10 ounces," she suggests. "Adding lemon slices will help with flavor and digestion." Credit: Getty The closer a food is to its original form, the better: Steer clear of ones with partially hydrogenated oils and high-fructose corn syrup. Koff's also not a big fan of "diet" foods: "The lower calorie count may be alluring," she says, "but you're getting little good nutritional value. Advertisement Advertisement Credit: Getty So you had an off day and downed half a pepperoni pizza. Sebacks are normal—and not deal breakers. "You don't change years of habits overnight," Koff says. "Don't beat yourself up. Wake up the next morning and say, 'Today I'm back on my plan.'" The answer to this question depends on numerous factors, including your age, height, current weight, activity level, and metabolic health, among several others. When trying to lose weight, a general rule of thumb is to reduce your calorie intake to 500 fewer calories than your body needs to maintain your current weight. This will help you lose about 1 pound (0.45 kg) of body weight per week.Below are average calorie ranges that consider these factors (4).WomenThe average, moderately active woman between the ages of 26-50 needs to eat about 2,000 calories per day to maintain her weight and 1,500 calories per day to lose 1 pound (0.45 kg) of weight per week. Women who are active and walk more than 3 miles per day will need to consume 2,200 calories or more daily to maintain their weight and at least 1,700 calories to lose 1 pound (0.45 kg) of weight per week. Young women in their early 20s have higher calorie needs. They require about 2,200 calories per day to maintain their weight.Women over age 50 generally require fewer calories. The average moderately active woman over 50 needs about 1,800 calories per day to maintain her weight and 1,300 calories per day to lose 1 pound (0.45 kg) per week.These estimates do not apply to women who are pregnant or breastfeeding, as they have significantly higher calorie needs.MenThe average, moderately active man between the ages of 26-45 needs 2,600 calories per day to maintain his weight and 2,100 calories per day to lose 1 (0.45 kg) pound per week.Active men who walk more than 3 miles per day may require 2,800-3,000 calories per day to maintain their weight and 2,300-2,500 calories per day to lose 1 pound (0.45 kg) of weight per week. Young men ages 19-25 have higher energy needs. They require an average of 2,800 calories per day to maintain their weight and up to 3,000 if they're active. To lose 1 pound (0.45 kg) per week, moderately active young men should consume 2,300-2,500 calories daily.Energy needs decrease as men age. Between the ages of 46-65, moderately active men need an average of 2,400 calories per day. After 66 years, the average man's calorie needs decrease to about 2,200 calories per day. ChildrenChildren have widely varying calorie needs based on their age, size, and activity level. Whereas the average toddler requires 1,200-1,400 calories per day, the average moderately active teenager requires 2,000-2,800 calories per day. Active teenage boys require even more. Children who are growing and developing normally and engage in regular physical activity usually don't need to count calories. When they're provided with a range of healthy options to eat, most moderately active kids naturally eat the amount of food their body requires. Calories are simply a measure of energy. To gain weight, you need to consume more calories than you expend. Conversely, you lose weight if you use more calories than you consume.That said, cutting calories without considering which foods you eat is usually not a sustainable way to lose weight. For example, choosing more nutrient-dense foods will benefit your health more than opting for nutrient-poor ones.Though it works for some people, most end up hungry and eventually revert to their old habits. For this reason, it's highly recommended to make a few other permanent changes to help you maintain a calorie deficit in the long term, without feeling starved.The following evidence-based eating and lifestyle changes have been shown to help people lose weight.1. Eat more proteinWhen it comes to losing weight, protein is the king of nutrients.Adding protein to your diet is a simple, effective way to lose weight with minimal effort.Studies show that protein both increases your metabolic rate and helps curb your appetite (5, 6, 7, 8).Because protein requires energy to metabolize, a high protein diet can increase the number of calories you burn by 80-100 calories per day (7, 9, 10, 11).Eating protein helps you stay fuller longer and may help you consume fewer calories throughout the day. One older study showed that people who ate 30% of calories from protein ate 441 fewer calories per day (12).In other words, you can increase the number of calories you burn and decrease the number of calories you consume simply by adding protein to your diet. Protein can also help fight cravings.In one 2011 study, consuming 25% of daily calories from protein reduced obsessive thoughts about food by 60%, as well as the desire to snack late at night by 50% (13).If you want to lose weight sustainably and with minimal effort, consider increasing your protein intake.It may not only help you lose weight but also prevent or reduce weight regain (14, 15, 16).SummaryIncreasing your protein intake can boost your metabolism, fight cravings, and significantly reduce appetite. This can help you lose weight and keep it off.2. Avoid sugary soft drinks and fruit juicesAnother relatively easy change you can make is to eliminate liquid sugar calories from your diet.This includes sodas, fruit juices, chocolate milk, and other beverages with added sugar.Your brain doesn't register liquid calories in the same way it registers solid calories.For this reason, drinking sugary soda doesn't make your brain automatically compensate by having you eat smaller amounts of other things instead (17, 18).Studies have shown that sugary drinks are strongly linked to an increased risk of obesity, with one study in children showing a 60% increased risk for each daily serving of a sugar-sweetened beverage (19, 20).The harmful effects of sugar go beyond weight gain. It can have negative effects on metabolic health and raise your risk of many diseases (21).Eating fruit, which also contains fiber and other important nutrients, isn't associated with the same negative effects as drinking fruit juice or other sweetened beverages. However, eating large amounts of added sugar and sugary drinks can harm your health in a variety of ways.There's no physiological need for these beverages, and the long-term benefits of avoiding them can be enormous.Summary It's important to avoid sugary soft drinks and fruit juices, as liquid sugar is the single most fattening aspect of the Western diet.3. Drink more waterOne very simple trick to increase weight loss is to drink more water.Studies have suggested drinking water can increase the number of calories you burn for up to 90 minutes (22, 23).Drinking about eight, 8-ounce glasses (2 liters) of water per day may make you burn about 96 more calories.However, recent studies suggest drinking water may not increase the number of calories you burn (24).The timing of when you drink water may be even more important. Drinking water immediately before meals may help reduce hunger and make you eat fewer calories (25).In one 12-week study, drinking 17 ounces (0.5 liters) of water half an hour before meals made people lose 4% more weight (26).When combined with a healthy diet, drinking more water, especially before meals, appears to be helpful if you need to lose weight.Drinking caffeinated beverages, such as coffee and green tea, may also boost metabolism slightly, at least in the short term. Doing so is associated with losing weight and keeping it off (27, 28, 29, 30).SummarySome studies have shown that drinking water may boost metabolism. Drinking it half an hour before meals can help you eat fewer calories.4. Exercise and lift weightsWhen you eat fewer calories, your body compensates by saving energy, making you burn fewer calories.This is why long-term calorie restriction can significantly reduce your metabolism.Plus, it can lead to a loss of muscle mass. Muscle is metabolically active, so this can reduce your metabolism even further.The only proven strategy to prevent this effect is to exert your muscles by lifting weights.This has been repeatedly shown to prevent muscle loss and stop your metabolism from slowing during long-term calorie restriction (31).When trying to lose weight, it's important to maintain or strengthen your muscles in addition to losing fat. If you can't get to a gym, consider doing bodyweight exercises, such as pushups, squats, and situps, at home.Doing some cardio, including walking, swimming, or jogging, can also be important — not necessarily for weight loss but for optimal health and general well-being.What's more, exercise has a variety of other benefits that go beyond weight loss, such as increased longevity and energy levels, a lower risk of disease, and simply feeling better every day (32, 33, 34, 35, 36).SummaryLifting weights is important, as it reduces muscle loss and prevents your metabolic rate from slowing.5. Reduce your refined carb intakeCutting carbs is a very effective way to lose weight, as it reduces appetite and makes you eat fewer calories (37, 38).Studies have shown that eating a low carb diet until fullness can make you lose about two to three times more weight than a calorie-restricted, low fat diet (38, 39).What's more, low carb diets have many other benefits for health, especially for people with type 2 diabetes or metabolic syndrome (40, 41).Yet, you don't have to go low carb. Simply ensure that you eat quality, fiber-rich carb sources, focusing on whole, single-ingredient foods.If you stick to whole foods, the exact composition of your diet becomes less important.SummaryCutting carbs may aid weight loss by reducing your appetite and making you eat fewer calories.Many websites and apps can help you track your calorie intake.Try using a calorie counter for at least a few days to see how many calories, carbs, protein, fat, fiber, vitamins, and minerals you're actually eating.Seeing the numbers like this can often be eye-opening.How many calories you need per day depends on whether you want to maintain, lose, or gain weight, as well as various other factors, such as your gender, age, height, current weight, activity level, and metabolic health.Reducing calories does not mean starving yourself. A few simple dietary and lifestyle changes, including exercising, properly hydrating, and increasing your protein intake, can help you lose weight and feel satisfied.

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