



BALANCED CHOICES®

monthly nutrigram

What's in a Calorie?

As the low fat vs. low carbohydrate diet debate rages on, one very important factor for weight control has been neglected and almost forgotten: calories. Remember them? We used to count them, cut them and curse them. But then things got more complicated when the focus shifted to *where* those calories were coming from. Well, maybe it's time to get back to the basics.

What exactly are *calories* and why are they important? Calories are a measurement of energy provided in various foods. We need calories to fuel our muscles, brain, heart, lungs, kidneys and all of our other organs to do their jobs. So calories aren't bad; in fact, they're good. We need them to live, work and play. The problem with calories is that when we get too many, the body stores them – eventually as fat. The basic equation of “calories *in* versus calories *out*” determines whether we are underweight, overweight or just right.

The best and most accurate ways to find out how many calories you need are actually quite expensive. Luckily there are simple formulas that can give you a ballpark figure of your daily energy needs. Here's an easy one that estimates the calories your body needs every day just for its most basic functions (basal metabolism):

For Women: multiply body weight in pounds by 10.

For Men: multiply body weight in pounds by 11.

For example, a woman who weighs 145 pounds would need 1,450 calories per day. But this formula does not take into account any level of physical activity – not even the physical activity of sitting around, getting dressed, household chores, watching TV or bathing! So extra calories must be added. Everyone should add in at least one third of the estimated basal metabolism to account for even the most basic activities. So, the 145-pound woman would take her 1,450 calories and multiply them by 1.3 to add in physical activity: $1,450 \times 1.3 = 1,885$ calories. If she is a regular exerciser – for instance, walking regularly – she should multiply her calories by 1.5: $1,450 \times 1.5 = 2,175$ calories. This number is now a rough estimate of her total calories burned throughout the day.

But what if she wants to lose weight? She should start with taking her total calories and subtracting off about 500 calories: $2,175 - 500 = 1,675$ calories. It is important not to subtract off too many calories. Cutting back on calories too severely can increase hunger so much that overeating results. By cutting back 500 calories per day, she should lose an average of a pound each week – even more if she increases physical activity.

It is very important to keep in mind that this formula gives us a very rough estimate. It's a good idea to keep a food record for several days and add up all of your calories. You can become familiar with how many calories are in various foods by reading food labels and investing in a good calorie-counting reference book. This can help you monitor how many calories you are getting on average and how much you need to cut back or add to achieve a healthy weight. The bottom line is that calories still do count.

References: Harris JA, Benedict FG. A biometric study of basal metabolism in men. Publication no. 279 of the Carnegie Institute of Washington, 1919. Frankenfield DC, et al., The Harris-Benedict studies of human basal metabolism: history and limitations. J Am Diet Assoc 1998;98:439-45. Boothby WM, Berkson J, Dunn HL. Studies of the energy of metabolism of normal individuals: a standard for basal metabolism, with a nomogram for clinical application. Am J Physiol 1936;116:468-84.