

counting calories

Counting calories is a common fixation for people with eating disorders. Many try to consume only a fixed amount in the day, while others try to calculate calories expended during exercise so they can balance the amount IN with the amount OUT. This becomes a habit that can be really hard to stop.

There are many sources that seem to encourage calorie-counting:

- Doctors, dietitians and government pamphlets offer information about daily allotments if you are, say, “a 25 year old female who is moderately active” (but they don’t specify how active)
- Women’s magazines have articles on how to burn off calories or eat fewer calories (but then there are recipes on the next page for chocolate cake)
- Food labels specify the calories per serving (if you can work out how much a serving is)
- Exercise machines (e.g. treadmills) have electronic displays showing the calories burned off each minute.

Myths About Calorie Counting

Myth 1: I can calculate the caloric content of food precisely

Fact: The figures in calorie books and food labels are only estimates – apples differ in size, sweetness, etc. It is impossible to predict the weight outcome of your caloric intake.



Myth 2: I can work out the exact amount of calories my body needs

Fact: Although this appears to make sense (our bodies do need a certain amount of energy, and different foods contain differing amounts of energy)...we can’t work these out precisely. It’s not as simple as *calories in minus calories out*. There are many factors that influence the relationship between what you take in and what you end up weighing, such as:

- Age, sex, weight, height, lean/fat ratio, metabolic rate
- The type of food consumed (100 calories of bran and 100 calories of butter are not the same)
- The timing/spacing of your meals
- Your activity level
- The temperature inside and outside your body

Our bodies do these calculations for us – a non-dieting adult human or animal maintains a stable weight over time, adjusting the body’s intake and performance to match changing conditions.

Dangers of calorie counting

With calorie-counting, you are likely to make increasingly restrictive food choices (many of which may be illogical). You may select from a narrow range of foods because you think you know their caloric content, and avoid a wider range of foods, some of which might be lower density and healthier for you.



Problems can arise if you limit your calories (stop at a level that you have guessed is the number of calories you “need” to lose or maintain weight):

- You will have many “failures” which weren’t really failures, but which contribute to low self-esteem.
- When you stop eating once you’ve reached an artificial calorie limit (rather than when you feel satisfied), you lose your sense of hunger and satiety, which can perpetuate fears of food and trigger binge eating
- If you adjust your caloric intake based on daily/weekly weight changes, you are using false feedback. Weight fluctuates regardless of how much we’ve consumed.
- Calorie-counting is harmful to one’s mental health. Dedicated calorie-counters calculate and re-calculate figures all day long - searching out particular brands of foods, denying themselves certain foods when they don’t know the caloric content, avoiding social situations involving eating... People who have recovered from eating disorders often say that the best part of it is not being so obsessed with figures and amounts.

How to stop calorie-counting

Food concerns are like anxiety disorders: rituals of reassurance that won’t disappear just because you know they don’t make sense. Counting calories is a habit - exposure and experience contribute to recovery. You won’t unlearn the information, it will just recede into the background of your life. It’s not the information that’s the problem, it’s the constant monitoring and the false precision implied. You can’t know all the details and you don’t have to know them. Start by NOT looking at food labels, NOT writing down calories, NOT doing the sums in your head. Work towards normal food habits - with regular eating, eating a variety of foods, and learning what is an appropriate portion size.