

Counting Calories

What is calorie counting:

Calorie counting means keeping track of how many calories you eat and drink each day. Calories are units of energy. Sometimes, calorie counting may include checking how much fat, carbohydrates, and protein you eat. People with eating disorders may use calorie counting, but many others use it too when they want to maintain or change their weight.



These days people can learn about calories from many places. For example:

- Food labels on packaged items
- Exercise machines as they often display how many calories 'burned' while exercising
- Restaurants often list calories next to menu items
- 'Health' apps and devices that track calories consumed and 'burned'
- Media and social media posts
- Doctors or other health professionals who give general advice about daily calorie limits

Problems with Calorie Counting:

Counting calories can cause problems or become even harmful at times. This is especially true for those who have an eating disorder or for those trying to build a healthier relationship with food.

1. Obsession and control

Calorie counting can make people think too much about what and how much they eat. This can cause stress and worry about making the "right choice". Calorie counting can become compulsive, reinforcing obsessive thoughts about food and control. Over time, it can turn into a habit that feels hard to stop. Apps or calorie trackers may reward people for eating less or having "perfect days". This can encourage unhealthy dieting and make some people more vulnerable to binge-purge cycles.

2. Calorie limits are inaccurate

It's hard to know exactly how many calories each person needs. Our bodies don't use the same amount of energy every day, and our needs can change from week to week, and month to month. Many things that can affect how much energy we need, such as:

- Age, sex, weight, height, muscle/fat stores, metabolic rate
- The type of food we eat (e.g., 100 calories of cereal and 100 calories of butter are used differently by the body)
- When and how often we eat our meals
- How active we are and how much we exercise
- Body temperature and even the temperature outside

It's also impossible to calculate the exact calorie content of the food we eat, even with the many books, apps, and types of scales available.

3. Interferes with body cues and signals

When people eat based on a calorie limit instead of listening to their bodies, it can confuse their natural sense of hunger and fullness. This makes it harder to eat intuitively or trust that the body knows how often and how much to eat.

4. Impacts physical health

Following strict calorie limits can negatively impact on our physical health if we are not getting the required amount of energy each day, or if we are missing out on essential nutrients. If we are deficient in a nutrient, our body is unable to function at its best. To learn more, please see our handout on [Starvation Syndrome](#).

5. Impacts mental health

Calorie counting can affect our mental health in many ways. Trying to stick to calorie limits can cause anxiety, and breaking those limits may lead to feelings of failure, low mood, or poor self-esteem. It can also make people believe they have to eat "perfectly", which can increase rigid or perfectionistic thinking. Food may start to feel "good" or "bad" based only on calories, which can bring on feelings of guilt or shame after eating. Calorie limits can make people spend too much time thinking about food, planning meals, or worrying about what to eat. This can make it hard to focus, make decisions, or enjoy eating with others. People may find themselves dreading social experiences, due to the worries about the food.

6. Hindrance to eating disorder recovery

For people with an eating disorder now or in the past, calorie counting is rarely helpful and often harmful. Building a healthier relationship with food means focusing on nourishment and enjoyment, not numbers. During recovery, calorie counting can prevent people from learning to eat intuitively and to trust their body's signals.

Calorie counting may feel comforting in the short-term, but in the long-run, it keeps an unhealthy, rigid, and obsessive focus on food.

Helpful Tips to Reduce Calorie Counting

- Delete apps or set screen limits for food-tracking tools
- Pick foods based on what you enjoy, rather than calorie limits
- Try to avoid packaging or menus that show calorie counts. If you can't, ask someone to help you choose based on what you enjoy
- Block online content or accounts that promote restrictive eating or fitness obsession
- Start by gradually reducing calorie counting and spend more time on hobbies or other interests
- At first, it may feel hard to "unlearn" calorie numbers, but the less attention you give it, the less it will interfere over time