

Counting Calories

Calorie counting is a common method that people use to try to maintain a certain body weight or eat according to specific dietary rules. Sometimes it occurs in eating disorders, but calorie counting is also used by people without an eating disorder who are trying to lose weight or be “healthy”. There are many sources that seem to encourage calorie counting, including:

- Doctors, dietitians and government pamphlets, who offer generic information about daily intake
- Media and social media, that can be full of advice about what (and what not) to eat
- Packaged food labels that specify calorie content
- Exercise machines that have electronic displays showing the calories burned off each minute
- Restaurants that list calories next to menu items
- Health and exercise apps and devices track calories burned and consumed

Actually, it can be hard to avoid calorie information! Calorie counting may become so habitual that people do it automatically and have great difficulty stopping. People may develop obsessive thinking that leads to anxiety about food and situations that involve eating. Often the sources mentioned above fail to identify the dangers of calorie counting.

Dangers of Calorie Counting

Problems can arise when calories or macronutrients are limited to a fixed amount (i.e., limiting daily intake to a certain number of calories, grams of fat etc.).

Inaccuracy

It's very difficult to determine the total amount of calories needed by each individual.

There are many factors that influence our energy needs, including:

- Age, sex, weight, height, muscle/fat ratio, metabolic rate
- The type of food consumed (the body does not use 100 calories of bran and 100 calories of butter in the same way)
- The timing or spacing of meals
- Activity level and exercise
- Body temperature and the temperature outside
- Our dietary needs will even fluctuate across days, weeks and months.

It's also impossible to precisely calculate the calorie content of the food we eat, even with books, apps, and scales! If we let it, our bodies will 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 as needed.



False Attribution

Often, people adjust caloric intake based on daily/weekly weight changes, but this is false feedback. Body mass and body fat are affected by many factors, and they fluctuate regardless of calorie consumption (as does the number on the scale). If we limit our intake to a certain amount and lose weight, we may falsely assume that the weight loss was because of the calorie rules we followed.



Disrupted Regulation

Eating according to a calorie limit (rather than internal sensations and drives), disrupts our sense of hunger and fullness. This makes it harder for our body to regulate intake in the future, meaning we are more vulnerable to overeating and possibly experiencing increased anxiety about our food intake. Using arbitrary limits can also leave us undernourished, either for our total energy intake or for our macronutrients (protein, carbohydrate, fats) and micronutrients (vitamins and minerals). If we are deficient in a nutrient, our body will not function at its best and we may experience negative effects on our physical and cognitive functioning.

Poor Mental Health

Using strict rules makes it easy to break them. People often see this as “failure”, which may contribute to low self-esteem. People who become obsessed with counting calories may calculate and re-calculate figures all day long, and feel anxious about foods when they don't know the calorie content - they may even avoid situations where this may occur (e.g. restaurants). Not obsessing about calorie content can be a great relief to individuals who have recovered from an eating disorder.

How to Stop Calorie Counting

Calorie counting is a ritual that is often reassuring in the short-term but in the long-run it maintains an unhealthy, rigid, and obsessional focus on food content. The ritual won't just disappear on its own, you will need to start changing your behaviours. Start by NOT looking at food labels, NOT writing down calories, and NOT doing the sums in your head. Work towards normal food habits - with regular eating, eating a variety of foods, listening to your body, and learning about appropriate portion sizes. You may not unlearn the information, but you can stop it affecting your thoughts and behaviours as you practice not buying into the thoughts when they pop up. Every time you fight off the urge to count calories, the habit will become weaker and easier to eliminate.