



ON COUNTING CALORIES

Simply counting calories to lose weight is hardly considered a “plan” anymore. We expect so much more to go into a weight loss regime: nutritional change, hunger slashing tricks, maybe even strategies for *not* cutting too many calories. However, counting calories for weight loss, or weight maintenance, resurfaces as a popular idea from time to time—and with good reason. Because generally speaking, it works!

No matter how you change your diet, it remains true that to lose weight you must take in less energy (calories) than you expend. And to keep your weight the same, you must *not* start to take in more energy (calories) than you expend. We use up some calories just by existing (what’s called our “basal rate”), and then many more by moving around and doing things, and by exercising. If you figure out how many calories you need to maintain the weight you desire (consult a chart—see the resources list) and stick to about that number, you will lose or maintain. Some people tend to burn calories more quickly or slowly than average, so a chart number may not perfectly predict what you’ll need, but it will probably come quite close.

Calorie counting works well for people who don’t mind learning what calories exist in what foods, and keeping track of that fastidiously each day. It’s a relatively simple way to track your intake and doesn’t necessarily require major changes in food choice. Often portion size cuts will reduce calories sufficiently.

However, calorie counting will not necessarily work so well if most of the foods you do choose are nutritionally poor. These foods might trigger cravings. They might cause your weight to remain stuck because of insulin resistance if you are quite overweight. Calorie counting also tends to work poorly for people who have negative associations to doing so in the past. If you think that calorie counting equals deprivation, rather than a structure within which to learn moderation, it will likely backfire.

For more on the pros and cons of calorie-counting and various other weight loss approaches, see: [Eat Sanely: This Year You Really Start](#), a self-help workbook course by Terese Weinstein Katz, Ph.D.