

Food for thought – beware of the silent calories

Do you want to lose a few pounds / kilo's? Where should you start? There are lots of diets and diet products promoted to shed the excess. Some of them work and some don't. But even when they do work, for a period of time and perhaps with other unwanted effects, it is usually the case that the weight just creeps back on afterwards. So what's the answer?

In reality, the only way to maintain a target weight is to balance energy input and output, i.e. food and drink versus activity and exercise. In the same vein, to lose weight you have to go into energy deficit where you're burning more than you're taking in. Conscientiously counting calories and tracking activity levels is great if you've nothing else to do with your time but, for most of us, that's far too big an overhead.

There are some major contributors to excess calories that you should be aware of; reducing those will help you to balance your energy account.

In terms of energy (calories), foods fall into 3 groups: carbohydrate, fat and protein. We think of carbohydrates (sugars and starches, including sweet foods, potatoes, rice, pasta, etc) as our main source of energy. This is absolutely correct; carb's should provide 50%, or more, of our daily energy requirement. Fat and protein will also provide energy and, gram for gram, protein provides the same amount of usable energy as carbohydrate. Fat, however, contains more than twice as much energy as either carbohydrate or protein.

In addition, protein and starchy carbohydrates will make you feel full for longer than either sugars or fats. This effect results from a combination of bulk, speed of digestion and stimulation of a variety of hormones involved in the control of digestion and appetite. Fats often provide the flavouring in foods, however they are also responsible for the 'more-ish' feeling that many savoury foods will give you – you want to carry on grazing on them and they don't fill you up for long.

There's one other category of energy (calorie) dense items – drinks. Sugar sweetened drinks such as canned fizzy drinks and non-pure fruit juice drinks are loaded with sugar and hence with calories. Whilst diet drinks are a low calorie alternative, switching to them won't help you to re-educate a sugar craving as the taste is virtually the same. Finally, don't forget about alcohol. It doesn't fill you up, other than by sheer volume, and the alcohol provides energy which your body will use first in preference to that from foods. The energy provided by those foods will then be stored away for later use as adipose tissue (fat) unless you're burning a lot of energy.

Just compare a few examples of the energy value or number of calories in a portion of food that is high or low in alcohol or fats:

Food / drink and portion	kcal
Bitter or lager – pint	150
Low alcohol versions - pint	50 - 65
Wine – 250ml glass	170
Chocolate cake – generous slice – 100g	465
Rich fruit cake – small slice – 50g	170
Shortbread – one - 25g	125
Crisps – small bag – 30g	160
Apple - medium	45
Banana – medium	95
Raisins – 1 level tablespoon	80
Cheddar cheese – small portion – 50g	200
Pork sausages – grilled – 3 (150g)	440
Tuna (in brine, drained) – 75g	75
Chicken (with skin) – roasted – 85g	180
Chicken (no skin) – roasted or grilled – 75g	130

As you can see, some of these foods and drinks are real big hitters in terms of calorie content.

There are many good reasons for not following crash diets, not least their potential deficiencies in specific nutrients, such as calcium (found primarily in dairy foods) and the prospect of your body responding as if to starvation and conserving every possible bit of energy.

If you really want to lose weight in a way that is likely to be permanent you should only aim to lose by 0.5kg per week. In order to do this you need to reduce your intake by 10-15% which is 200 - 450kcal, depending on your usual intake (or increase your activity by a similar amount without increasing intake).

To do this, you can just cut down on everything, which is likely to leave you feeling hungry, or you can cut out or replace the most energy dense foods: avoid the sugary drinks and alcohol; grill rather than fry; choose lean cuts of meat; avoid rich sauces and dressings; switch to semi-skimmed or skimmed milk if you drink milk in quantity; remember that cheese is high in fat whereas tuna and chicken are not and beware of full fat spreads and mayonnaise in sandwiches.....

If your meals now seem less inviting because the flavoursome fats have been reduced, think about using herbs and spices instead. There's also a small benefit in eating spicy foods in that they will increase slightly your basal metabolic rate and hence energy expenditure (just don't go for rich and oily curries which will be high in fat).

So you don't need to feel deprived of all your favourite foods – just cutting down on some of the major calorie culprits and substituting a few slimmer alternatives, over time, can make all the difference.

Mary Russell

Sports Nutritionist