



Don't do the maths!

All calories are not equal, as Helen Cooke explains

If you've overindulged over Christmas, like most of us you're probably now thinking about how to quickly shed the excess weight. Well, the following may provide some welcome news... If you're looking for ways to drop a few extra pounds, but sustain the weight loss, don't be overly concerned with simply counting calories.

The concept of calorie-counting is quickly turning into a rather outdated one and is now being questioned by top scientists. The best way to achieve and sustain a healthy weight is to pay more attention to the type of food you're eating, rather than being overly concerned with the number of calories it contains.

Despite what popular calorie-counting websites might suggest, all calories are not equal. When it comes to weight gain, your body will not store as much fat from eating 400 calories of vegetables or high-quality protein as it will from eating a 400-calorie Danish pastry (alarmingly, this is the number of calories in an average supermarket size pastry). The type of food you eat influences whether or not you will store fat from it and is therefore as important a concept as calorie-counting.

The way calories are absorbed by our bodies depends on what else the food contains. Recent research has shown that certain high-calorie foods such as walnuts and almonds can actually promote weight loss when eaten in moderation (no more than a handful a day – or approximately 60g). Usefully, the fibre structure of nuts blocks some of the fat they contain being absorbed. Not only do they fill us up nicely, so are a helpful handy snack, but they also have heart health-giving properties. In fact the FDA (the US Food and Drug Administration) have recently officially recognised walnuts as a cholesterol-lowering food.

When making food choices, the nutritional properties need to be considered as well as calorie content. A glass of apple juice, for example, contains



the same amount of calories as an average-sized apple. The fibre in the apples helps slow down the absorption of fat in our diet and keep cholesterol and blood sugar under control. Additionally, ursolic acid in apple peel can help build lean muscle. My nephew eats four a day and plays tennis for Glos County! Because apples contain approximately 14 per cent fibre compared to the average one per cent fibre in apple juice, whole apples are clearly a far better choice.

People have started to become obsessed by low-fat/low-calorie foods and instead substituted them with refined carbohydrate foods. These are often less nutritious and tend to contribute to problems with blood sugar control. Researchers are now beginning to realise that problems with blood sugar control may be the key to why some people can't shift stubborn excess weight. The latest research in the field of weight loss suggests simply reducing your intake of refined carbohydrates (think sugar, white flour, bread, pasta, or any highly processed food) and increasing good-quality protein. ■

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TOP TIPS FOR BALANCING BLOOD SUGAR:

- Ensure you have one portion of high-quality protein with every meal: Fish, chicken, eggs and nuts barely increase blood sugar levels.
- Don't obsess about calorie counting, but eat real food: that is food processed in your kitchen, not ready-made processed meals from the supermarket
- Avoid eating too many refined carbohydrates such as high-sugar foods/drinks, biscuits and cakes which give empty calories. If you can't resist a few squares of chocolate, ideally choose the dark sort with 70 per cent cocoa and eat straight after a high-fibre or protein meal to avoid too much of a sugar hit.
- Include high-fibre carbohydrates in your diet – root vegetables (parsnips, carrots), apples/pears, brown rice and wholegrains (brown option).
- If you're trying to lose a bit of weight quickly, you may want to limit your intake of all carbohydrates for a week or so. Check out The Dukan Diet (apparently popular with the Middleton sisters!), a modified version of Atkins which allows a few more vegetables.
- Stubborn weight issues may be caused by lifestyle factors or hormonal/metabolic imbalances, which may need a more personalised nutritional programme. If you have a health condition, it is always good to first check with your doctor or visit a nutritional therapist before trying any new way of eating.

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