



Nutrition Fundamentals: Calories

Calories...yawn. Seems like something your great aunt Molly might worry about, not an active athlete like you. But knowing about calories is a fundamental skill of your nutrition game plan. Calories are to your body what gas is to your car - no gas, no go!

How many calories you need each day depends a lot on your body composition and how physically active you are. The more muscle you have, the more calories you burn. Muscle cells are calorie-burning factories. So a person with 170 pounds of muscle burns more than a person with 120 pounds of muscle. The more physically active you are, the more your muscles work, and that burns even more calories.

The chart below gives you an idea of how many calories per pound you burn in a day at different activity levels.

Calories per Pound per Day

Activity Level	Male	Female
Sleeping, resting	11	10.5
Very Light	14	13.5
Light	17	16
Moderate	18.5	17
Heavy	22.5	20

Sitting, standing, driving are very light activities. Things like walking, bowling, and golfing are light. Fast walking, cycling, dancing, jogging, swimming, tennis and weightlifting would fall under moderate. Examples of heavy are walking uphill with a load, basketball, climbing, football, soccer, bicycle racing and marathon running.

To estimate how many calories you burn in a day, multiply your weight, in pounds, by one of the factors that best describes your activity level. A common tendency is to overestimate your activity level. For example, being heavily active for just an hour or two out of the day would not put you in the heavy category for the whole day. Use the factor that describes what you do most of your waking hours.

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Example: Chris weighs 170 pounds and trains for a few hours on most days. The rest of the day is spent walking to class, sitting in class, studying, working as a waiter and sleeping. Chris would be in the light category. His calorie estimate is $170 \times 17 = 2,890$ calories per day.

Using a mathematical formula to figure how many calories your body burns in a day gives you a ballpark estimate. Your calories might be much higher or lower, depending on how intensely you train, how much muscle mass you have, how many hours you sleep, and even how much you fidget.

Since this isn't math class, just remember this. The exact number of calories you burn doesn't matter. Whether you burn 2000 calories or 5000 calories, the best gauge of calories is your weight. Changes in your body weight over several weeks reflect your calorie intake. If you eat more calories than you burn, the calories are stored as fat or muscle and you gain weight. If you eat fewer calories than you burn, your body burns its own fat or muscle and you lose weight. If you are eating the number of calories equal to the number you burn; you stay at the same weight.

NOTE: It is important to match your calorie intake to your body composition goal. If you want to gain muscle mass, you need to eat more calories. If you want to lose body fat, you need to eat fewer calories.

Getting the right number of calories seems like it should be a no-brainer, but it is a difficult fundamental skill to master. In fact, eating too many calories or not eating enough calories is one of the most common problems for athletes. Having a general idea of how many calories you need is a fundamental nutrition skill.

