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How Many Calories to Cut, Part 2

Last Saturday, I wrote about the weight loss calculator developed by Dr. Kevin Hall (1), and there are a couple more points I want to make. I think the calculator is fine although, as I suggested last week, I don't think it will provide much more information than the equations of the past. But within the paper, there's a discussion of weight re-gain that I think is worth knowing about. It really explains a lot of what you and I experience. The researchers also give an idea about how weight loss programs could be constructed to help sustain weight loss.

Adherence

In order for the calculator to work every day, it requires perfect adherence to the diet and the exercise program. The problem: that never happens. While they suggest it's a weakness of any type of calculator, they still depict weight loss as linear both in the graphs and spreadsheet.

Here's a better idea. Most experts agree that we should look at the daily caloric average over week. For example, if your target was 2,300 calories per day, you may actually eat 2,300 on Monday—2,200 on Tuesday—1,850—2,700—2,000—2,300—and 2,750. The daily average is 2,300 calories, so you've achieved your goal.

To get the most out of the calculator, keep track of your calories every day and use the daily average for a week as the barometer of whether you're meeting your goal or not. Do the same with minutes of exercise. If the average per day for a week meets what you're supposed to hit every day, you should be able to hit your weekly weight loss prediction.

Gaining It Back

Hall and colleagues discuss why weight loss programs don't sustain weight loss. They use theoretical examples from the calculator. Pardon me, but there's nothing theoretical about it—it happens. It's happened to me and probably you as well. Their contention is that weight loss happens rapidly with most programs. Since most programs are 12 weeks long, let's use that as an example. With strict adherence to a program, you may lose 12 to 25 pounds and maybe even more in that time frame.

How Weight Sneaks Back On

They contend that by the end of the program, you may be eating a little more than you were at the beginning of the program but you're still seeing the numbers on the scale go down. I'll give you a specific example of how that happens. Ever go out and really overdo it one night, but then you get on the scale the next morning and see that your weight didn't change? Maybe it was even down a little. Here's the point where it all starts to go wrong: you start to tell yourself that maybe you can eat a little more now that you've lost the weight. The problem is that a little bit more food, or a little bit less exercise, allows you to start regaining the weight you've lost. It may take a year or two, but you're doomed.

That's the reason Hall and colleagues believe they have it correct: because their calculator can account for even 50 calories per day extra. Of course, that doesn't really help us unless we track our calories every day.

The Solution

Hall and colleagues speculate that perhaps a better way to insure your weight loss is permanent is by losing weight in stages. In a short stage one, you aggressively restrict calories and increase exercise. But because that's not realistic to sustain forever, you go into a weight maintenance phase for a month or so to sustain the weight you've lost. Then you repeat the cycle. The goal is to be able to permanently change your lifestyle. The maintenance part is really your new lifestyle for caloric intake and exercise.

The Bottom Line

Could Hall's weight loss solution work for permanent weight loss? I think it could, but it would depend on how willing you are to track your calories during the maintenance phase. You've often heard me say eat less, move more, for life. Those last two words are the most critical. We can all do something drastic for a few weeks, maybe even a couple of months—but not forever.

Think of this approach to weight loss as interval weight-loss training. You're going to have a short interval of intense effort and a longer time of sustained effort. Repeat those intervals until you've achieved your weight goal. Just remember that the rest interval doesn't mean return to your old habits, it means you're adapting to your new lifestyle. If nothing else you've ever done has worked, use the Hall calculator to set an intense program for two weeks (but not less than 1,200 calories per day) and maintenance phase for four weeks based on what the calculator recommends. All you've got to lose is weight you've wanted to lose forever.

What are you prepared to do today?

Dr. Chet

Reference: Lancet 2011; 378: 826–37.

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