Basic Health Info

Tracking Your Calories

By Chet Zelasko, PhD

In research study after study, as well as my experience with client after client, what people say they eat does not match what they actually eat. How do I know? Because if they really ate what they say they do, they would have no problem weighing what they want to weigh. One solution is to keep track of what they eat long enough to change their eating habits permanently. That includes both which foods they eat, but even more important, the quantity. And when I say *they*, I'm talking about you and me.

That's what this Basic Health Info is about: calculating the calories you eat. I want to warn you right now that it takes time. Measuring and weighing foods can be tedious, but here's the thing: if you're frustrated with your current weight and haven't been able to get to the weight you want to be, isn't it worth a little time to measure your food until you can estimate portions by sight? If you think it's too much work, find another way to eat less, but don't whine about how you can't lose weight. Weight gain is what happens when we eat with our eyes or our emotions and not our brains. It's time to get our brains into this effort and leave the senses and feelings behind.

Foods You Prepare at Home

There are two categories here. The first is raw foods you prepare from scratch and the second is processed foods that you just eat; the latter includes foods such as soup and frozen meals that include some preparation as well as ready-to-eat foods such as crackers and bread. In order to estimate how many calories you take in, you have to know how much you eat. That gets into one of my favorite topics: measuring vs. weighing foods.

Measure vs. Weigh

I'm a fan of Alton Brown of the Food Network, and he's a stickler for weighing foods. The reason is that the texture or state of a food can affect how tightly it fits into a measuring cup. Thus a cup of oil wouldn't weigh the same as a cup of beans which wouldn't weigh the same as a cup of flour.

Think about it. How is spinach measured? Do you mash as much as you can into a measuring cup? What about whole spinach leaves versus chopped? In the case of spinach it's not really important, but how about cooked elbow macaroni? Do you just fill the cup loosely or do you tamp it down? That's one reason why weighing is better. The second reason I've observed is that when you weigh food, a serving size may be more than you expect in some cases and a lot less in others. If the serving size is wrong, the calories will be wrong, too, and you're not much better off than you were.

Experiment a little. For example, when you look at the nutrition label for pasta, it's almost always given as dry weight in ounces or grams. Cooking can increase the volume by at least 100%. When you look up pasta in a database, it gives serving sizes in dry and cooked volumes, but you're faced with the issue of how to pack the pasta in the cup. Weigh a serving of pasta, cook it, and weigh it again. Then put it into a measuring cup and see what it looks like; then put it on a plate so you'll start to identify serving sizes when you can't measure your food. That's one way to start training your brain to recognize how much you eat. But we all cook pasta slightly differently with some liking it al dente and others very well cooked. That will make a difference, so weighing it dry is first step to making sure the size is right.

Meat also presents a challenge. Nutrition labels give the calories per ounce of raw meat. You can weigh it before cooking to get an idea what happens to the meat after cooking. Again there will be a difference depending on whether it's rare or well done. So weigh it raw, cook it the way you like it, and then weigh it again. What have you lost? Water and some fat. But now you have a visual idea of what a raw four-ounce steak looks like after cooking it the way you like it. That helps in restaurants where you really wouldn't want to take out a scale to weigh it. But it brings up a good point: what kind of scale should you use?

Scales

No question in my mind that digital scales are the way to go. If you get a digital scale that has a tare feature, you can zero out the scale with an empty plate or bowl on it. That allows you to just measure the pasta or beans or meat and not have to worry about getting the scale wet. You also don't have to do math in your head to subtract the weight of the plate from the total weight to calculate the weight of the food. I use a Pelouze digital postal scale with a five-pound capacity; it currently costs around $30. One of the more popular brands on the Internet seems to be Escali food scales. They can get very complicated, but all you need are the tare function and the ability to switch between grams and ounces.

Calculating the Calories

If the food contains a nutrition label, you're pretty much done. Weigh the food to get your serving size. But what about foods that don't have a label or when you're trying to put together a recipe? There are several databases that you can access via the Internet or you can buy a book. I even found nutrition database software for my phone—I guess that means I never have an excuse!

The best nutrition database can be found at www.nutritiondata.com. You can register for free, but you don't have to register to use the site. You can store recipes if you want. You can also search by nutrient, which can be handy. Say you want to know which nut contains the highest amount of omega-3 fatty acids per one-ounce serving. You can look it up—it's walnuts.

Here's something you'll need to know: the default weight is 100 grams for many foods, which equals 3.3 ounces. If you're measuring in ounces, simply divide the calories for 100 grams by 3.3 and you'll have the calories per ounce.

Finding foods can be a challenge. Entering *steak* in the search bar yields 223 entries. It searches for the word *steak* as the whole name or part of a name. Selecting the category Beef Products lowers it to 153. Searching *sirloin steak* reduces it to 27 entries. From there, you can determine whether it's raw or cooked, trimmed a specific way, and cooked a specific way in order to get to your target. It seems daunting but here's the thing: once you do it and you know how many calories per ounce there are in foods you eat regularly, you don't have to do it again. Create your own database of your favorite foods.

For the foods you know you eat all the time, keep a page in your log with the number of calories per ounce. Then all you have to do is weigh it from that point forward, or if you're in a restaurant, estimate the weight. My list includes potatoes, avocado, chicken breast, and more. I eat them often, so knowing the calories per ounce becomes second nature. I also keep track of some fruits and vegetables by measuring device—it's just easier to measure a half-cup of blueberries or peas, and no one became overweight eating more vegetables. Some foods are not worth tracking: celery, cucumber, zucchini, spinach, or any type of lettuce that you're going to put in a salad. They contain so few calories that it's not worth the time to count them.

What about foods you can't find? Search the Internet by the brand name of the food. Almost every manufacturer puts the nutrition information on their website; then it's simply a matter of finding it and adding it to your database.

Eating Out

You may not eat at fast-food restaurants often, but almost all of them have nutrition data available online. If you check out the food before you actually order it, you can really save some calories.

For example, a Burger King® Whopper with cheese is 770 calories. Get it without cheese and you drop 90 calories to 680. Holding the mayonnaise saves 160 calories, so now you're down to 520. Giving half the bun to the birds saves another 120 calories and you're down to 400 calories. This isn't a health food by any means, but you've cut almost half the calories—and if that's where your kid's soccer team goes after a game, it's good to know the best alternatives.

Or say you want a treat. A junior (four ounces) chocolate Frosty at Wendy's® is 160 calories; a small (eight ounces) is 320. At McDonalds®, a vanilla cone is 150 calories, a Fruit 'n Yogurt Parfait is 160, a hot fudge sundae is 330, and a 12-ounce chocolate shake is 440. Apple Dippers are 35 calories; add the low-fat Caramel Dip, and that's another 70—at 105 calories, that may be your best choice.

Full-service restaurants can be challenging—not many list their nutrition information. There are some things you just know. If it's deep fried, you're adding fat so you have to question whether it's worth the caloric cost. Cheese is about 100 calories an ounce and salad dressing about 100 calories per tablespoon. Experience will guide you after you spend some time researching foods you like to eat. Once you know that a breaded and deep-fried onion is about 1,200 calories, do you really think you'll eat it regularly? Maybe you'll split one with several friends for a special occasion, but that's about it. And if you've been measuring your food at home, you'll recognize when a restaurant serves you two or three servings on one plate.

Write It Down Now

The purpose of keeping track of your calories is to get to know what you're actually eating. You have to write it down immediately. If you don't, you'll forget what you ate and the amount—so you're missing the whole point. You won't have to do it forever, but you'll have to do it long enough to change your eating habits. And if you did it forever, that wouldn't be such a bad thing. Why? Because it makes you pay attention to what you're eating, and when you do, you'll eat less. Think about it. If you kept track of what you ate and you were eating 5,000 calories a day, how long would you want to keep recording it? Taking the time to measure, weigh, look up, and record what you eat may not be the most fun thing you'll ever do, but if it gets you to the weight you always wanted to be, wouldn't that be worth the effort? I think so. Now that you know what to do, get off it and get after it.

Dr. Chet Zelasko is dedicated to helping men and women get healthy and fit. As a health and fitness consultant with a PhD in Exercise Physiology and Health Education from Michigan State University, he provides health information based on the most recent research and delivers it in a way that's easy to understand. Whether in person during seminars, in audio recordings, or in the written word, he makes sense out of the health news people hear so they can make better health choices and achieve optimal health. He's conducted research and been published in peer-reviewed journals. He is certified by the American College of Sports Medicine as a Health and Fitness Specialist and has taught in ACSM certification workshops throughout the United States; he also belongs to the American Society of Nutrition. Although Grand Rapids, Michigan, is home, he has presented seminars on health to groups all over North America, Mexico, and the Caribbean and has written extensively on the health benefits of a good diet, regular exercise, and targeted supplementation.