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# How many calories is what counts

Keeping track helps only if you know what number you should aim for

By Nanci Hellmich  
USA TODAY

**D**o you know your number? Not your cell-phone number or cholesterol, but the number of calories you should be eating daily to maintain a healthy weight?

A recent poll showed that about two-thirds of people can't accurately estimate how many calories they need. But if you want to lose a few pounds this year, it's important to have a grasp of how much you should be eating.

"There is no magic to weight loss — the key is to decrease your calories without feeling hungry or deprived," says Dawn Jackson Blatner, a registered dietitian in Chicago and author of *The Flexitarian Diet*. She's a nutrition blogger at [dietchallenge.usatoday.com](http://dietchallenge.usatoday.com).

Your specific caloric needs are determined by several factors, including your muscle mass, current weight, height, age and activity level, Blatner says. As a general rule, a sedentary woman can lose weight on about 1,500 calories a day; a sedentary man can consume about 1,800

calories a day, she says.

Some people may have to go a few hundred calories lower to lose weight, and some will be able to go higher, she says.

Jessie Price, food editor of *EatingWell* magazine and co-author of *EatingWell 500-Calorie Dinners*, says another way to get a rough estimate of how many calories you should be eating to maintain your weight is to take your current weight times 12. So if you weigh 165 pounds, you need about 1,980 calories.

To lose a pound a week, you need a deficit of 500 calories a day, which you can get by eating less or exercising more. To lose 2 pounds a week, you need a deficit of 1,000 calories a day.

But, Price says, "don't eat less than 1,200 calories a day. It's hard to get all the nutrients you need if you eat less than that."

She recommends keeping a journal of everything you eat and the calories in those foods. That will keep you honest.

"If you eat a large fries at McDonald's, that's 500 calories, which is how many calories your entire dinner should be," she says.

You don't need to be calorie-obsessed, just calorie-conscious, Blatner says. Many peo-

ple are afraid that if they limit calories, they'll be hungry, but to avoid that, she recommends eating three meals and two healthful snacks a day.

About 25% of your plate at meals should be whole grains such as whole-grain pasta or brown rice; 25% of your plate, lean proteins such as fish or chicken; and 50% of your plate, colorful fruits and vegetables, Blatner says. "This ratio keeps the volume high, so you aren't hungry, but calories low, so you lose weight."

It's also important to recognize the difference between snacks and treats, she says. "Snacks are nutritious and filling, whereas treats are neither."

The best snacks combine produce and protein, such as a pear and string cheese, an apple and almonds or celery and peanut butter, she says.

It's easier to have control over your calories if you cook for yourself, Price says. If you do a little planning and keep your pantry and refrigerator stocked with healthful ingredients, it's not that hard to whip up some nutritious meals.