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How Fast Should You Lose Weight When Cutting?

How fast should you aim to cut? That will ultimately depend on how long you'd like to diet, your comfort with potentially losing a bit of muscle, and your motivation and perceptions a your cut progresses. This article and cutting calculator will help guide your decision making

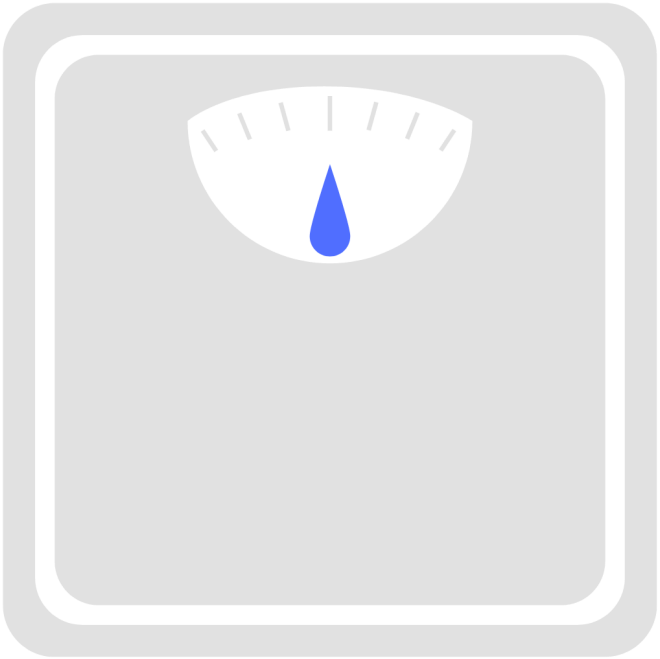
by Greg Nuckols • October 14, 2024 • Articles, Exploring Bulking and Cutting

The first article in this three-part series addressed the question of whether you should bulk or cut, the second article discussed the rate at which you should aim to gain weight, and this final article will discuss the rate at which you should aim to lose weight (including a free cutting calculator).

Ultimately, there are pros and cons associated with both fast and slow rates of weight loss. Faster rates of loss will help you lose fat faster, but you'll also experience larger drops in performance, sticking to your diet may become more challenging, and you'll increase the risk of losing muscle. Conversely, slower rates of weight loss mean you'll need to diet for a longer period of time in order to achieve your desired levels of leanness, which can also be a challenging prospect for some people.

At the end of the day, the decision is up to you, but we tend to think that more gradual rates of weight loss are preferable for most people, most of the time. So, let's dive in.

Looking for a quick answer? Check out our free Cutting Calculator below.



How fast should you cut?

Calculate your optimal cutting rate, based on your body weight, desired outcomes, and the biggest challenges you face when cutting.

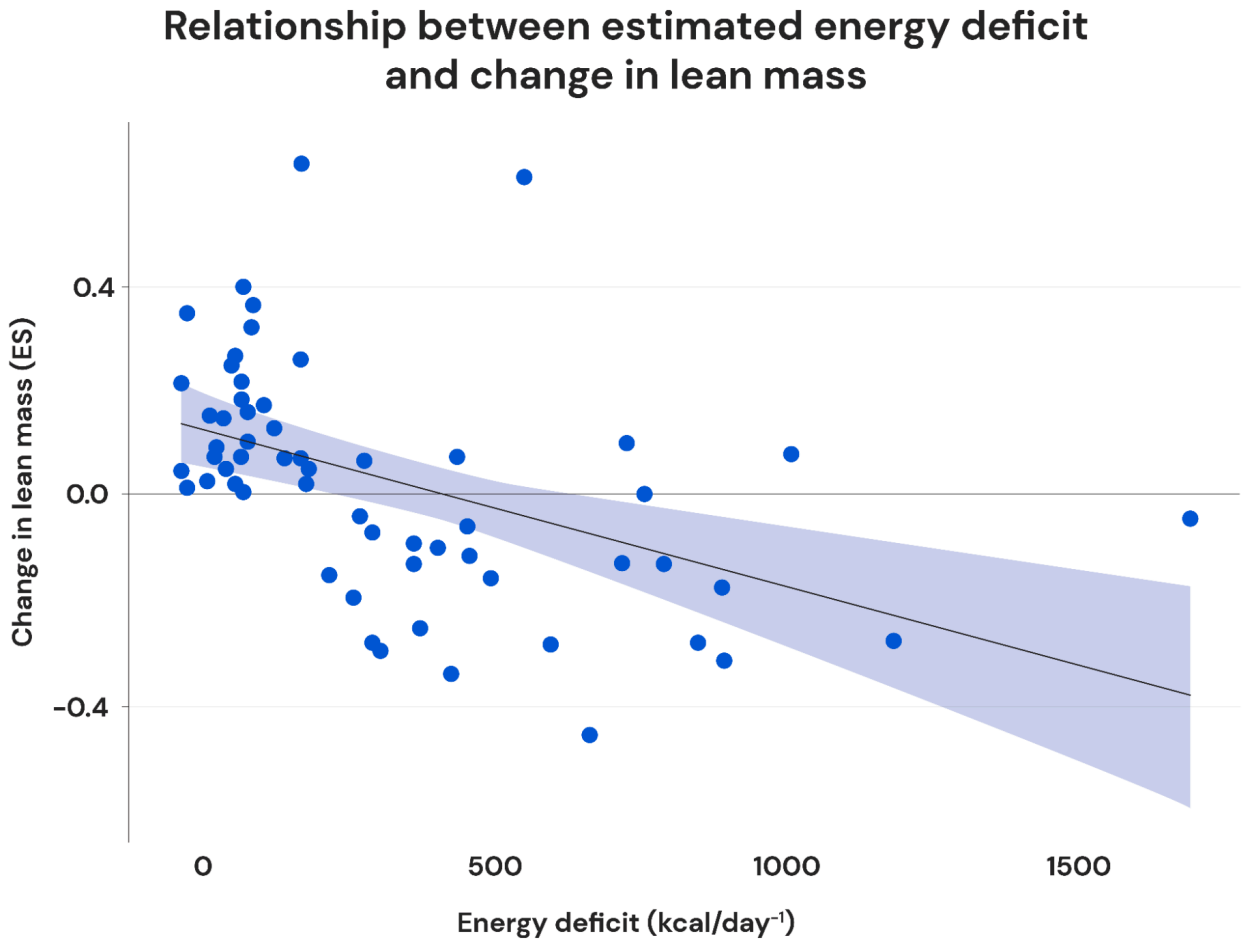
Get Started

How quickly should you aim to lose weight on a cut?

Unlike the previous article on bulking, we don't need to traverse through the research study-by-study in order to determine appropriate rates of weight loss when cutting. A lot more research has been conducted, so we don't need to try to pull threads and identify patterns in a relatively small handful of studies. Furthermore, recommended rates of weight loss don't need to be split out by differing levels of resistance training experience, because the principles of fat gain and fat loss are more-or-less universal. Recommended rates of

weight *gain* differ with varying levels of training experience because rates of muscle growth vary with differing levels of training experience. But, for cutting, resistance training helps everyone preserve muscle when losing weight, and the rate at which you lose weight will just depend on your energy deficit.

A 2021 meta-analysis by Murphy and Koehler found that losses in lean mass increased as the size of daily energy deficits increased. With energy deficits smaller than about 500 Calories per day (which would equate to losing about 1 pound or 0.5kg per week), subjects (on average) were able to experience a *bit* of body recomposition (losing fat, while gaining little muscle). With deficits larger than 500 Calories per day, subjects tended to lose lean mass, with the rate of lean mass loss increasing as energy deficits grew. For most people, this would result in a rate of weight loss of about 0.5-0.8% of body weight per week.



From Murphy and Koehler (2021)

So, if your main priority is to lose fat as quickly as possible while retaining your fat-free mass, a rate of weight loss of *around* one pound/half a kilogram per week, or *around* 0.6-0.7% of body weight per week should do the trick. But, assuming you don't want to teeter right on the edge of preserving vs. losing muscle mass, keeping a slightly wider range in mind can offer more flexibility without making the diet excruciatingly slow, and without virtually guaranteeing that you'll lose a *lot* of muscle.

So, for most people, most of the time, a rate of weight loss in the range of 0.25-1% of body weight per week, or between 0.5-1.5 pounds (0.25-0.75kg) per week should be the default. As you get closer to 1%, 1.5 pounds, or 0.75kg, your rate of fat loss will be a bit faster, but yo *may* lose a bit of muscle in the process. At rates closer to 0.25%, 0.5 pounds, or 0.25kg, yo diet may take a bit longer, but you can be very confident that you'll be able to maintain you muscle mass, or *potentially* even gain a little bit of muscle as you diet.

With that said, I'll go out on a limb and posit that considerations solely focused on body composition outcomes are what drive decision making when *planning* a cut on the front end, but they take a backseat to motivation and tolerability as a cut progresses. For most people, cutting is fairly unpleasant. As you get into a cut, you may find that it's hard to stay motivated when pursuing a conservative rate of weight loss – you just want your diet to be done with so that you can shift back to maintenance or bulking, even if that means you lose a bit of muscle in the process (especially since it's fairly easy to rebuild muscle, due to the phenomenon of "muscle memory"). Conversely, you may find that the day-to-day experience of maintaining a moderate-to-large energy deficit negatively affects your mood, energy levels, performance, and levels of hunger to a larger degree than you're comfortable with, even if you're maintaining your muscle mass.

So, functionally, I think you should be open to rates of weight loss within a range of about 0.1-1.5% of body weight per week. We recommend starting somewhere between 0.25-1%, but don't be afraid to adjust your target rate of weight loss to be a bit faster or a bit slower based on your motivation, feelings, and perceptions when cutting.

As one final note, I'd caution against scaling percentages of body weight infinitely. Aiming to lose 1% of body weight per week is a slightly aggressive but totally reasonable rate of weight

loss for most individuals, but it can be *very* aggressive and result in *very* large energy deficits for heavier people.

Just to illustrate, if you weigh 150 pounds, losing 1% of your body weight per week would require an energy deficit of about 750 Calories per day. However, if you weigh 300 pounds, aiming to lose 1% of your body weight per week would require an energy deficit of 1500 Calories per day. That's not only a much larger absolute energy deficit, it's also a much larger *relative* energy deficit, because total daily energy expenditure (TDEE) scales non-linearly with body mass.

On average, people who weigh 150 pounds have a TDEE of around 2400 Calories per day (there's certainly a wide range, but that's the norm), whereas people who weigh 300 pounds have a TDEE of around 3600 Calories per day. So, aiming to lose 1% of body weight per week would result in a relative energy deficit of about 31% for the person who weighs 150 pounds. In other words, they'd be consuming about 31% less energy than they were burning on a daily basis. For the person who weighs 300 pounds, aiming to lose 1% of body weight per week would result in a relative energy deficit of around 42%. That's a very large relative difference. A ~30% energy deficit is fairly aggressive, but it's typically relatively tolerable and sustainable, whereas an energy deficit of >40% usually feels *rough*.

Pontzer et al (2021)

All of which is to say, we think a rate of weight loss of about 2 pounds or 1 kilogram of body weight per week serves as a good "upper limit" for most people, most of the time. Once daily energy deficits begin exceeding 1000 Calories per day, diets tend to get quite unpleasant and unsustainable for the vast majority of people.

So, how fast should you aim to cut? That will ultimately depend on how long you'd like to diet, your comfort with potentially losing a bit of muscle, and your motivation and perceptions as your cut progresses.

You can use the table below and cutting calculator at the top of the page to help inform your decision making. But, if you don't have a strict timeline for when your diet *needs* to finish up, we'd generally recommend opting for a "Conservative" to "Moderate" rate of weight loss, since it will help you feel better, maintain (or even build) muscle mass, and preserve your energy levels and performance throughout your cut.

Recommended rates of cutting					
	Very Conservative	Conservative	Moderate	Slightly Aggressive	Aggressive
Percentage of body weight per week	0.10%	0.25%	0.5-0.75%	1.00%	1.5%*
Relative energy deficit	<5%	5-10%	10-20%	20-30%	>30%
*We'd recommend to keep your rate of weight loss below 2 pounds or 1 kilogram per week. Regardless of bodyweight, that's a quite aggressive rate of weight loss.					

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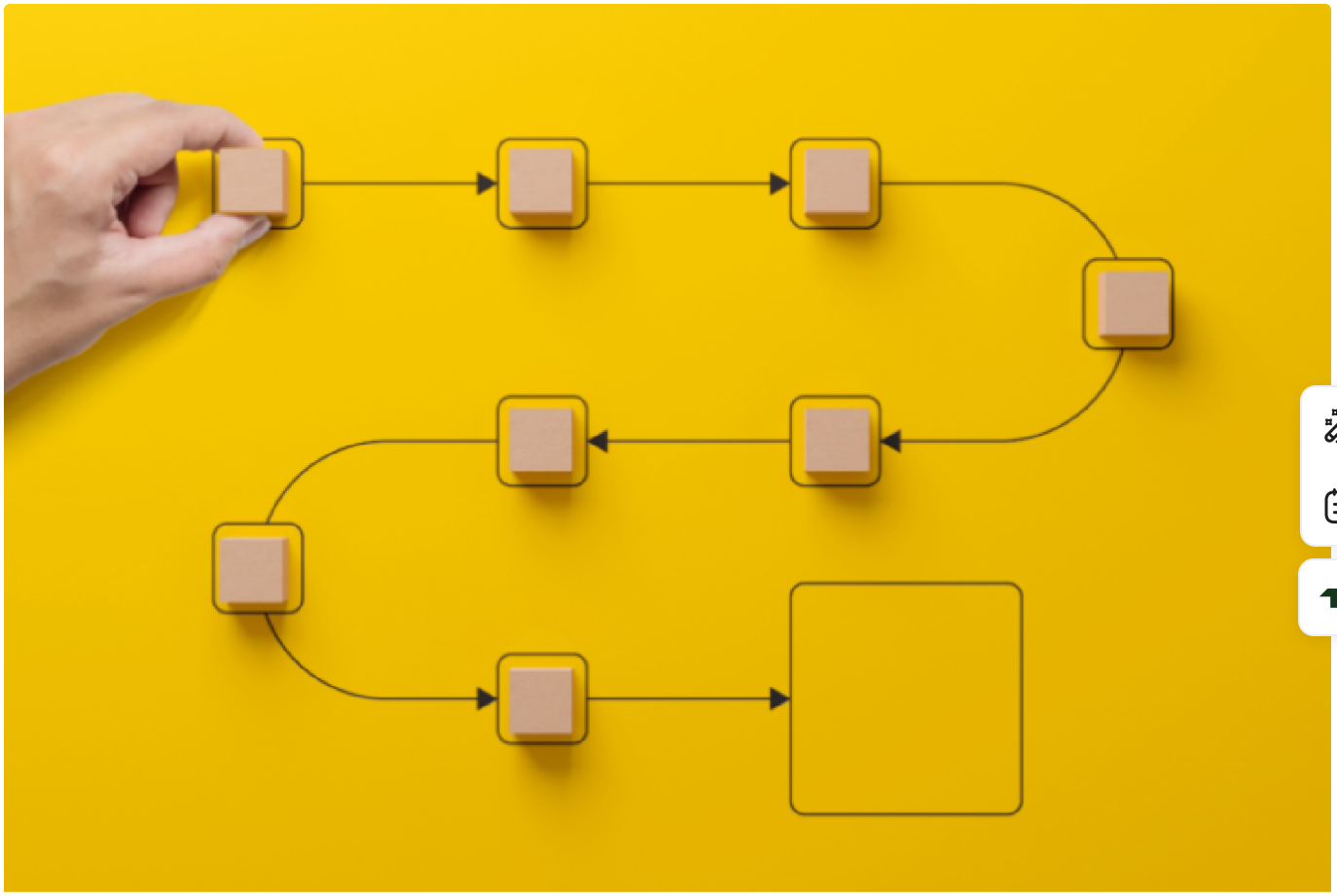
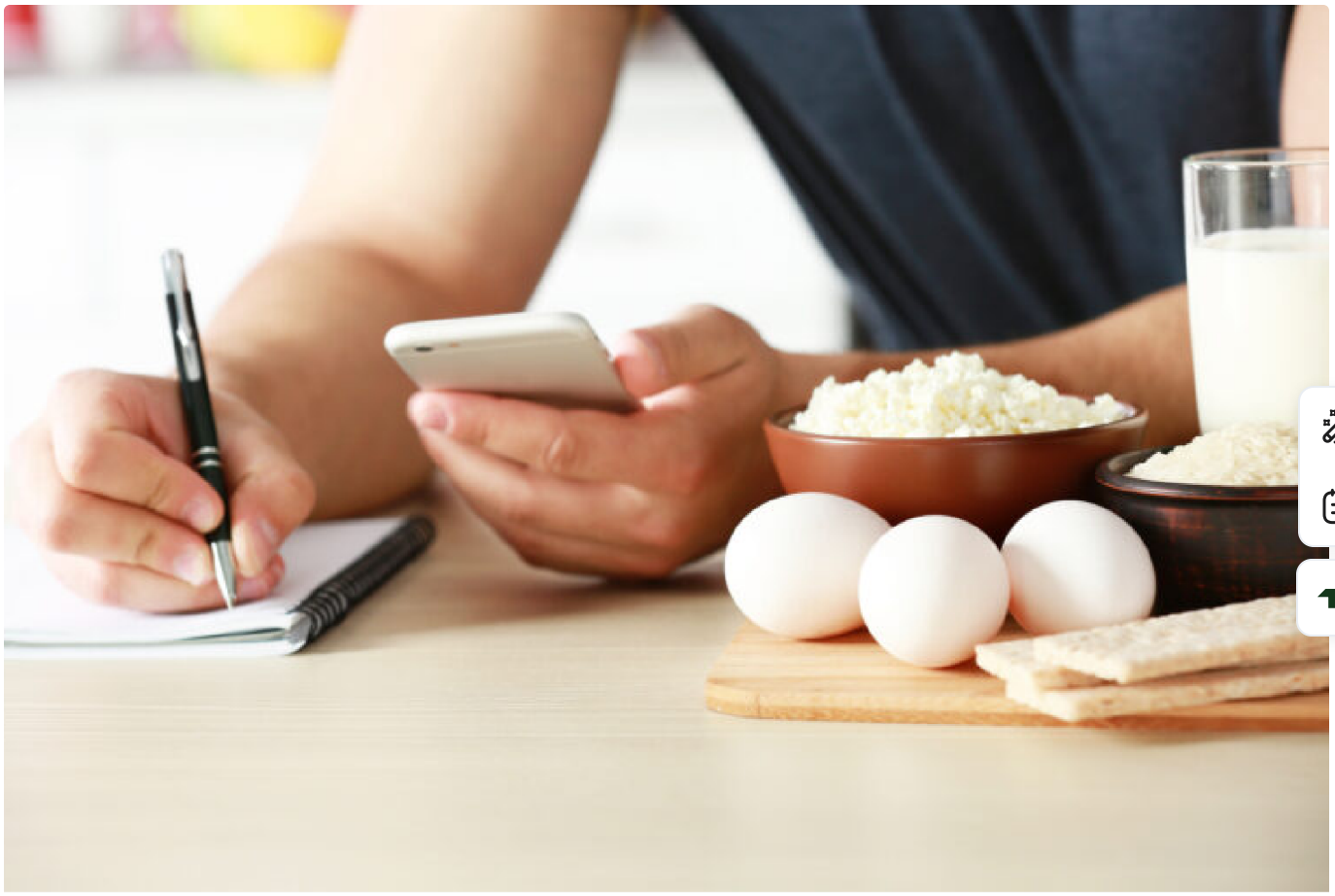


How to Form (or Break) a Habit

In the third installment of our series on habits, we explore the technical mechanisms and essential principles underlying habit conditioning. We trace the cycle from goal setting to habit formation, providing in-depth guidance and insights on effectively leveraging these processes to cultivate (or break) habits.

April 8, 2024



The Problems with Calorie Counting

Calorie counting seems simple, but there are a few common pitfalls that often prevent dieters from reaching their goals. In this article, you'll learn to navigate those challenges and develop a better approach to calorie counting for gaining, losing, or maintaining weight.

May 20, 2022

Why Habit Formation Matters For Goals

This article explores the concept of habits, their significance in achieving your goals, and the importance of giving them more attention.

March 18, 2024

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