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How Many Calories Should You Eat in a Day?

It depends on factors like your age, activity level and if you want to maintain, lose or gain weight

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"How many calories should I eat a day?" This may be a question you often ask yourself. Unfortunately, there's no clear-cut answer. Many factors go into determining your calorie needs, including your age, weight, gender, height and activity level.

Average daily calorie needs

According to dietary guidelines in the United States, adults 21 years old and older should consume anywhere between

1,600 and 3,000 calories per day.

"Keep in mind, these calorie recommendations are for people who are at a normal weight," says registered dietitian Julia Zumpano, RD, LD.

Calorie recommendations for women

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) shares its recommended calories per day for women:

Age
21-25
Calories: sedentary 2,000
Calories: moderately active 2,200
Calories: active

Age
2,400
26-30
Calories: sedentary 1,800
Calories: moderately active 2,000
Calories: active 2,400
31-50
Calories: sedentary 1,800
Calories: moderately active 2,000

Age

Calories: active

2,200

51-60

Calories: sedentary

1,600

Calories: moderately active

1,800

Calories: active

2,200

61+

Calories: sedentary

1,600

Calories: moderately active

Age
1,800
Calories: active 2,000

Source: *[Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2020-2025](),*

Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion)

Calorie recommendations for men

In general, men need more calories. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) recommends men get:

Age
21-25
Calories: sedentary

Age
2,400

Calories: moderately active

2,800

Calories: active

3,000

26-35

Calories: sedentary

2,400

Calories: moderately active

2,600

Calories: active

3,000

36-40

Age

Calories: sedentary

2,400

Calories: moderately active

2,600

Calories: active

2,800

41-45

Calories: sedentary

2,200

Calories: moderately active

2,600

Calories: active

2,800

Age

46-55

Calories: sedentary

2,200

Calories: moderately active

2,400

Calories: active

2,800

56-60

Calories: sedentary

2,200

Calories: moderately active

2,400

Calories: active

Age

2,600

61-65

Calories: sedentary

2,000

Calories: moderately active

2,400

Calories: active

2,600

66-75

Calories: sedentary

2,000

Calories: moderately active

2,200

Age

Calories: active
2,600

76+

Calories: sedentary
2,000

Calories: moderately active
2,200

Calories: active
2,400

Source: [Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2020-2025](https://health.clevelandclinic.org/how-many-calories-a-day-should-i-eat), Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion)

How many calories do I need?

Everybody's daily calorie intake is different, which can make it hard to figure out the magic number.

Active people may need more than those who have desk jobs. And younger people need more than older people, whose metabolisms slow down as they age.

These factors can impact your caloric intake:

- Sex

- Height

- Weight

- Age

- Activity level

- Hormones

- Medications

- Sleep

- Stress level

Your basal metabolic rate (BMR) is the minimum calories per day your body needs to function while resting. Your BMR contains about 60% to 70% of the energy used by your body — and this number is unique to you. And that number can change if you're trying to lose, gain or maintain your body weight.

So, how do you calculate your BMR? If you wear a smartwatch to track your fitness, it uses BMR to come up with your daily calorie goals. You can also find BMR calculators online.

"BMR is an essential starting point for calculating how many calories to eat, although it's an estimate and isn't 100% accurate," clarifies Zumpano.

How many calories should I eat to lose weight?

If you're trying to lose weight, you might be tempted to radically slash your calorie count to reach your goals.

"If your weight is above the normal range for your height and your goal is weight loss, you need to consume less. A deficit of 500 calories can provide a weight loss of 1 pound per week," says Zumpano.

But proceed with caution, she advises. If you eat fewer than 1,200 calories per day to lose weight, it's tough to get all of the nutrients you need to stay healthy. And eating too little can work against you — it can halt weight loss and even lead to weight gain as your body goes into starvation mode and stores fat.

On an average day, you may burn anywhere from 1,300 to 2,000 calories without any physical activity. You can add some extra exercise to burn more calories.

"Regular exercise not only burns calories, which means you don't need to cut back as much, but it also builds muscle which uses up more calories, therefore increasing your BMR," explains Zumpano. "This allows for a more balanced diet and the ability to get all the nutrients you need."

How many calories should I eat to gain weight?

If your goal is to gain weight, don't just focus on eating more. You want to make sure you add weight in a healthy way.

Opt for high-calorie, nutrient-dense foods like meat, fatty fish, eggs, full-fat yogurt, whole grains, nuts and oils. You should also consider eating more often and looking for ways to add extra calories to each meal. For example, adding nuts or seeds to your yogurt, oatmeal or cereal.

"Don't forget to include more liquid calories that won't leave you feeling too full by the next meal," recommends Zumpano. "Opt for high-calorie beverages like whole milk, cream, 100% fruit and vegetable juices, smoothies and high-calorie nutrition shakes."

Beware of 'empty calories'

While it's a good idea to know how many calories you need each day, it also matters what *kind* of calories you're

consuming. You may have heard of "empty calories." These can be found in junk foods, sugar-sweetened beverages and processed foods — items that typically contain added sugar and an unnecessary amount of fat and calories.

While you might get a boost of energy from consuming those foods, they tend to be void of nutrition — specifically fiber, minerals and vitamins.

Those empty calories won't satisfy you and are designed to make you want more, leading to food cravings and overconsumption. You may even feel tired or fatigued. These foods also promote inflammation and gut dysbiosis, which can both inhibit weight loss and eventually lead to disease.

Instead, make sure you focus on eating a well-balanced diet full of fruits and vegetables, lean meats, whole grains, nuts and seeds (nut and seed butters are great, too), and healthy fats such as olives, avocados and plant oils.

"Think about the foods you often crave — an apple or Brussels sprouts often don't come to mind," notes Zumpano. "Empty calorie foods cause craving and overconsumption, leading to excess calories and poor nutritional intake."

Bottom line?

If you're a person who likes to track and measure things, you could benefit from determining exactly how many calories you need.

Digital apps and online calorie calculators can help, Zumpano says. But because it can be complicated, she recommends seeing a dietitian to get an expert's opinion.

They can take your unique factors into account and provide you with information on how to tailor your meals and exercise.

Whether you're trying to lose, gain or maintain your weight, figuring out how many calories your body needs can be key

to helping you achieve your goal.

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