



The New Math of Counting Calories

YOUR CHOICES MATTER

Reviewed by Sharon Denny, MS, RD

You can't compare apples to oranges — but what about yogurt to french fries?

For decades, many popular diet plans have been built on the apparently simple concept of limiting the number of calories. But a report by a team of Harvard scientists in summer 2011 — using data collected from decades of surveys of health professionals' eating habits and medical records—illustrated what millions of frustrated dieters already knew: truly healthy eating is about more than cutting calories.

After controlling variables, the Harvard study showed that those who ate certain healthy foods (like yogurt and nuts) tended to gain less weight or even lose weight, and those who often ate certain other foods (like french fries and sugar-sweetened drinks) tended to gain weight.

Boost Your Nourishment

The evidence suggesting that *what* you eat is as important as *how much* you eat is no surprise to Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics spokesperson Heather Mangieri, MS, RD, CSSD, LDN. "Eating a calorie-controlled diet may keep you at a healthy weight, but it does not necessarily mean that you are well nourished," she says.

Avoiding certain foods makes them irresistible, leading to cravings and ultimately overeating. "We often get caught up in the caloric content of food and forget about the nutrition that food provides," Mangieri says.

Balance Your Plate

Mangieri says those wanting a jump start on a healthier lifestyle should put balanced, nutrient-dense foods at the top of their menu, even though those foods may carry bigger calorie totals. "Every meal, whether it is breakfast, dinner, or a snack should contain a mix of carbohydrates, protein and healthy fats," she says. "Protein is needed to build and repair our muscles, boost our immune system and even help stabilize our blood sugar."

Here are some other tips Mangieri recommends:

- **Make fruits and vegetables half of your lunch and dinner plates.** They contain essential vitamins, minerals and fiber that may help protect you from chronic diseases. Substituting fruits and vegetables is a great option for those looking to control or lose weight.
- **Eat low-fat dairy.** These foods are an excellent source of several essential nutrients that work together to protect bones, including calcium, magnesium, phosphorus, potassium, protein and vitamin D. Three of these minerals—calcium, potassium and magnesium—may also play an important role in managing healthy blood pressure.
- **Look for grains.** They have been linked to a lower risk of heart disease, diabetes and certain cancers. Whole grains are the healthiest type of grain because they are a better source of fiber and other important nutrients, such as selenium, potassium and magnesium.