

Menu Plans: Friend or Foe? (Friend, of course!)

By Karen McCoy

In many popular diet books, “Calories don’t count” is a frequently repeated theme and “you can eat as much as you like” is an often repeated promise. Other programs recommend that you count “portions” rather than calories. Still others say that you must keep a strict accounting of everything you eat. Who is right?

Well, trying to count every single calorie - in the literal sense - is probably not realistic or necessary as a lifestyle for the long term (all the number crunching can drive you crazy, for one thing!)

Yet any diet program that says you can "eat all you want and still lose weight" is one you should avoid because that is one of the biggest lies in the business.

The truth is, that line is a bunch of baloney designed to make a diet sound easier to follow. Anything that sounds like work, such as counting calories, eating less or exercising, tends to scare away potential customers.



The law of calorie balance is an unbreakable law of physics: Energy in versus energy out dictates whether you will gain, lose or maintain your weight. Period.

I believe it's very important to develop a respect for portion control and the law of calorie balance.

I also believe it's an important part of nutrition education to learn how many calories are in the foods you eat on a regular basis – including (and perhaps, especially) how many calories are in the foods you eat when you dine at restaurants.

The law of calorie balance says:

To maintain your weight, you must consume the same number of calories you burn. To gain weight, you must consume more calories than you burn. To lose weight, you must consume fewer calories than you burn.



If you only count portions or if you haven't the slightest idea how many calories you're eating, it's a lot more likely that you'll eat more than you realize.

So how do you balance practicality and realistic expectations with a nutrition program that gets results? Here's a solution that's a happy medium between strict calorie counting and guessing.

Create Your Own Menu Plans

Create a day menu using an EXCEL spreadsheet or your favorite nutrition software. Make sure you've covered the nutritional bases of quality protein, healthy fats and healthy carbs. ***And put in the total caloric count that you need to maintain / lose weight, depending on your goal.***



Once you have your daily menu, print it, stick it on your refrigerator (and/or in your daily planner) and you now have an eating "goal" for the day, including your caloric target. So rather than having to write down every calorie from every morsel of food you eat for the rest of your life, your menu plan serves as a daily goal and guideline.

Build your repertoire of daily menu plans this way. (Most people eat the same 11 foods, and I find eating similar foods creates much more success in healthy weight loss. There's no surprises!) This way you get to be creative, and you have an abundance of healthy daily menus at your hands. Fast, easy, and you don't have to think about counting.

If you get bored eating the same thing every day, you can create multiple menus, or just exchange foods using your primary menu as a template.

Using this meal planning method, you really only need to "count calories" ONCE when you create your menus, not every day.

After you've got a knack for calories from this initial discipline of menu planning, then you can estimate portions in the future and get a pretty good (and more educated) ballpark figure.

So which would you rather do: Take a wild guess, cross your fingers and hope for the best, or increase your chance for success with some simple menu planning? I think the right choice is obvious.

Here's a sample Daily Menu Plan that I enjoy often.

Breakfast – ½ cup cooked oatmeal, ½ cup plain yogurt, 1 scoop protein powder, ½ cup berries.
Total calories: 350

Lunch and snack (I sip on this from 9 am to 2 pm, because I'm working at the gym all day).
Protein shake – almond milk, water, 2 scoops protein powder, Udo's oil, flax seed, lecithin, 1 cup berries, ½ cup yogurt, creatine, glutamine, vitamin C.

Total calories – 550-600 (this by far is my biggest meal, and also when I'm the most active and my metabolism is highest. This is not an accident, it's by design).

Dinner (usually early, at around 5:30 or 6) – Buffalo burger (no bun) sliced ½ avocado and tomato, drizzled with balsamic vinegar, sprinkled with parmesan and sea salt Some sliced raw peppers.

Total calories – 425

If I have any 'wiggle room' left, (calorically-speaking), I'll add in a small glass of **red wine**....150 calories. Nothing beats a nice burger and a full-bodied red wine.

Total calories – 1425. If I'm ravenous when I go to bed, I allow myself a handful of almonds, or a ½ scoop flavoured protein powder in ½ cup yogurt. I still have room before I hit my 1650 calories/day limit, so I can play with this a bit.

Summary: So.....I don't count calories, really, as I know what works for me and what I'm getting, and I really don't eat out a lot (dangerous) or grab stuff on the run (more dangerous). I don't like the guess work.

I usually eat the same 9 or 10 foods day in day out. I love oatmeal, steel cut oats, shakes, chicken, fish, stir frys, steak, burgers, loads of salad with berries and nuts, and low glycemic veggies like broccoli, cauliflower, kale, peppers, asparagus.

I don't eat pasta (makes me full, sleepy) and I don't eat bread (same thing, and it sucks up caloric valuable room that I'd rather use for other foods). I have 2-4 glasses of wine a week, because I make room for it.

If I overindulge, I cut back on calories the next day, because I don't want them stock-piling. It also allows me to get back on track mentally.

I do a **mini juice fast** (36 hours) once a week or once every 2 weeks (we'll look at this later), and I allow myself to eat out once in awhile, but I'm still careful what I eat. No dessert, one glass of wine (or two, depending.... ☺)

WEIGHT LOSS TIP: Don't make the mistake of overindulging, then looking at yourself or your weight the next morning and *think you got away with it*....it takes about 24 hours for it to show up on your body, so count 24 hours from when you overindulged and you'll likely see it and feel it.

Also, when you really overindulge (a cheat meal doesn't count), it increases your stomach's capacity by 25% and it takes 7 days for your stomach to go back to its regular size. Food for thought!

