

Nutritional Guidelines for Optimal Fat Loss

By Chris Young, Gym Manager at the highly prestigious Spa at Pennyhill Park and Powerlifter.

Introduction

Over the course of my 24 years in the fitness industry I have come across all types of crackpot ideas pertaining to the holy grail of fitness –the optimal way to lose body fat. Our governments would have us believe that for health and longevity we should consume 60% of our calories from carbohydrates yet the incidence of obesity in the western world has sky rocketed in the last 25 years. If the food pyramid were correct then we wouldn't have over half the population overweight (BMI>25) and over a third obese (BMI>30).

So what is the right way? In the 1970's and 80's the fledgling fitness industry looked to endurance sports for the answer; the running craze that was sweeping America at the time seemed to turning out some pretty lean individuals. This was true but we now know that unless you're running 50+ miles a week all those carbs will just make you fat. Even those who put in the miles often don't look great; the average guy who runs a marathon in 4.30-5 hours seems to me to have very little muscle in their chest, shoulders, and arms, but along with this he'll have a pot belly. Is that the look that people want from their 3-4 hour a week investment in the gym?

In the 80's and 90's the industry turned to bodybuilding for the answer; these guys had very low bodyfat levels (<5%), they must know the secret, right? Well yes and no. One of the secrets to losing fat is increasing your muscle mass which will speed up your metabolism; on this point bodybuilders are spot on, however the way a bodybuilder trains might work for an individual who spends 8+ hours a week in the gym and is taking bucket loads of steroids but it doesn't work that well for the average person. The type of muscle isolation work that bodybuilders perform these days just doesn't increase muscle mass effectively enough, unless you're either a genetic freak or taking large doses of steroids. Along with their suspect training the typical bodybuilders diet doesn't work well for most either; many will spend months "bulking up" which involves eating massive amounts of food (5000+kcal/day), along with the obligatory bucket load of drugs and then attempt to live on steamed fish and broccoli for 3 months in a desperate bid to get in shape for their next contest. In this "cutting" phase various diet drugs such as thyroxin and diuretics are used and some resort to cocaine in order to get that "ripped" look. Have I put you off yet?

At this point I must state that the above obviously doesn't apply to all bodybuilders but I was fortunate enough to be around dozens of competitive bodybuilders from 1984-97 and what I've written above pretty much covers how a world class bodybuilder will prepare for a contest; by the way, I'm lead to believe by some old friends that things have really gotten out of control now! What, and

they weren't before! Suffice it to say I don't believe that this model should be followed by anyone.

So, what is the most effective way to burn fat? Well you can never be sure, theories come and go but I believe that the approach that I'm about to tell you about which has helped thousands worldwide, including some in my gym, can also help you.

What should I eat?

Each meal should contain protein such as meat, fish, poultry, eggs, or milk. If you are within 2 hours of a workout then you may have some starchy carbs such as pasta, rice, potatoes, bread, and porridge. If you're not training on that particular day or are outside for the training window (about 2 hours either side) then only eat protein, veggies (not potatoes), and fruit (not bananas, smoothies, or juice).

When you read this you might say "but I have porridge for breakfast, that's good for me, why can't I have my porridge", well, you can, but only within the 2 hour workout window, other than that you just don't need the carbs if you're serious about losing fat –sorry about that.

What should I be drinking?

By far your main beverage of choice should be water; green tea is also very good. If you must, diet sodas are permitted but not too much (less than half your water intake). Regular tea and coffee can also be consumed in moderation but without sugar or cream.

How often should I eat?

Research has shown that people who eat 6 small meals as opposed to 2-3 larger meals will lose a greater amount of fat even if calorie expenditure is the same. The lesson is do not eat all your calories in one go!

Be Consistent

Diets work, but not if you follow Atkins on Monday, Weight Watchers on Tuesday, and then Chris' see food diet on Wednesday, etc! Whatever diet you follow, be consistent and give it a chance, as in, follow it for at least 4 weeks

How do I stay sane while dieting?

No normal person could follow the above information to the letter, that's where the 80% rule comes in; this rule states that to achieve results from any protocol you must follow it at least 80% of the time (90% if you're being very strict).

Let's say that you've committed to eating 5 meals a day (this would be minimum), that equals 35 meals a week. If we use the 80% rule then you would eat 28 meals as described above, as in protein, fruit, and veggies; that leaves 7 meals a week to have a bit of what you like. Having said that if you have a huge curry on Monday, a Chinese on Tuesday, and an Italian on Wednesday, etc then even if

you're eating perfectly the rest of the time you are not going to lose weight; there's still the little matter of calories in having to be less than calories out.

If, however, you feel like having a glass or two of wine or a medium sized bar of chocolate then that would be one free meal; if you have a big old pig out then count that as at least 2 meals, pig out plus dessert equals at least 3 meals.

Eating all your meals

This will sound harsh but if you miss a meal that counts as one of your free meals. This plan works partly because of the high meal frequency; therefore if you're not eating at least 5 meals a day then you're not following the plan, you're doing something else.

How to keep it going

For long term fat loss plan cycles of 80% compliance for up to 4 weeks followed by up to 2 weeks of 90% followed by a back off 4 week block of allowing yourself 1-2 protein/carb meals a day (depending on training) while being 80% compliant.

By doing this you're giving your mind and body a break as well as setting yourself up for continued fat loss so long as your weight training and interval based cardio sessions are being done.

What if I totally blow it?

Good news; there was a study done in Sweden which seems to show that if one consumed significantly more calories than usual so long as they went back to a sensible diet within 2 weeks then extra bodyfat would not be laid down. The increase in weight from a holiday it seems is usually due to clogged pipes (undigested food in your intestines caused from a change in diet) as opposed to fat increase but after the 2 week mark of eating poorly you will get fat. Therefore if you have a bad few days don't beat yourself up too much but get back to eating sensibly again as soon as you can.

A while ago there was a very good piece written by Mike Rousell which illustrated this point. In the US people go mad over Thanksgiving Day (late November) and absolutely stuff themselves. If that were it then the damage could be contained but with many it tends to become a six week feast taking in Christmas and the New Year!

Mr Rousell informs his readers that Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day, and New Years Day are 3 days not 6 weeks! You might be thinking, all very well but I'm British therefore I don't celebrate Thanksgiving. True but I've seen many people who have the first Christmas party of the year in the first week of December and continue through to New Year; 4 weeks of excess can be tough to pull back.

Making the Decision.

I'm saving the most powerful piece of information to last; in a recent article Dan John quoted Ken Blanchard from his hugely successful book "The One Minute Manager". Mr Blanchard asked managers of the 1980's to look at their goals, look at their behaviours, and then decide if their behaviours matched their goals? Dan John asked this of his athletes and I'm asking this of you! What are your goals? How much fat do you want to lose? By when? And what are YOU going to do about it? What new positive behaviours are you going to adopt to replace the behaviours that have got you to where you are now?

Harsh words –maybe, but sometimes a little tough love is needed. Good luck with your training and body composition goals.

Chris has over 24 years of experience in the fitness industry and has competed in Powerlifting, Martial Arts, and Bodybuilding. He is a self confessed anorak with anything to do with strength and conditioning. Chris can be contacted at youch01@yahoo.co.uk