The Truth About Fat & Getting Lean

Dr. Joe Klemczewski

The entire spectrum of dietary fat theory has both its teachers and its students. Low fat diets, high fat diets, and balanced diets have all made their mark on the diet industry in the last two decades. Each extreme has been popularized by seemingly credible experts and countless people claim to have found the magic formula in their choice of diet fads. There is yet a cloud of confusion that cloaks the truth about dietary fat somewhere between empty bottles of flaxseed oil and T-bone steaks. Your understanding of how and when to use the right fats in the right amounts can make losing body fat much easier and more effective.

Despite all the fancy ratios and percentage of nutrients that are tossed about, the first step is to make sure your calorie intake is low enough to support weight loss. This is the first step, but only the first of many if you want to predictably and consistently lose body fat. Whether you subscribe to a low-fat, high-carb diet or a high-fat, low-carb diet, neither will be effective if your overall calories are higher than your metabolic rate allows. Once the appropriate calorie intake is established, understanding how your body metabolizes body fat and dietary fat is the only way you can get in the best shape of your life!

The first point that must be understood is how dynamic fat is in the body. If you gained ten pounds last year, you're not retaining the exact same ten pounds of body fat that was originally stored. Your body is constantly storing triglycerides in adipose (fat) cells and also releasing them as you need more energy between meals. In fact, adipose cells always store fat after meals and then releases it when needed. Fat is actually used for up to 60% of the body's energy needs at rest A surprising point to most is how easily your body stores dietary fat as body fat. Dietary fat is the easiest nutrient for your body to store as body fat. As digested dietary fat is carried past adipose cells in the blood stream through capillaries, adipose cells simply intake the fat to be stored.

If you're tracking this data carefully, you'll see why I stated that overall calorie intake is still always the first step. If you're taking in even a moderately low amount of fat, even unsaturated ("good") fats like flaxseed oil, a great deal of it can end up stored as fat. However, if your overall calorie intake is lower than your metabolic rate requires, you'll end up releasing that fat and "extra stored fat" between meals.

So, if so much of dietary fat ends up being stored as body fat, why not just eliminate it completely? Essential fatty acids found in certain unsaturated fats play a role in hormone production, cellular repair, immune function, and many other processes of life. If deficient in these essential fatty acids, health consequences cumulatively add physical stress to the body. For the average

bodybuilder, a less than optimal amount of testosterone production is enough of a threat to keep at least 15-20% of their calories coming from fat. However, during the last stages of contest dieting, short bouts of decreasing dietary fat to 10% (especially the last month) can be effective to make sure the last couple pounds of body fat can be used for energy more efficiently.

Dr. Barry Sears is credited with the "balanced" or "40-30-30" type of diet where approximately 40% of calories come from carbohydrates and 30% from both protein and fat. Without detailing his entire nutritional design, he advocates a full 30% of calories to come from fat. One of the reasons I have already mentioned is due to the physiological benefits of essential fatty acids. Another reason is his focus on keeping blood sugar moderated. Fat takes longer to digest and slows the digestion and assimilation of carbohydrates so insulin spiking is less of a problem. This type of diet has merit but only if the percentages are representative, once again, of an overall calorie intake that's low enough to cause a caloric deficit. For a bodybuilder, though, carbs have a more important role in energy for workouts, protein (muscle) sparing, and to stimulate metabolism then for the average person. In my opinion, especially during contest dieting, this makes dropping fat intake to 15-20% of overall calories beneficial as it makes more room for carbs and protein. For a sedentary or moderately training individual, lesser protein requirements and a more flexible diet plan can allow for a higher percentage of dietary fat.

A discussion of fat intake and dietary theory wouldn't be complete without commenting on the ketogenic camp. What do we do with the experts that would have us eat unlimited amounts of fat and protein but eschew carbs with the promise of a shredded physique? Since excess carbs are easily converted to body fat and lead to lethargy, higher risk of diabetes and heart disease, and many health perils, it's correct applied wisdom to control carbs and their quality. It's also imperative to make sure that carbs are low enough to not supply all the energy requirements of the body. A high-carb diet where protein and fat intake is low will unlikely allow for much body fat loss because the body will have little reason to access a secondary energy source such as body fat. If you take the opposite extreme and eliminate almost all carbohydrates from the body, then stored fat will be released at a very rapid rate. Though used successfully by many bodybuilders, this type of dieting has its problems. First, adipose cells release fat to be used as energy in the form of glycerol and fatty acids. Body cells intake the glycerol and fatty acids to metabolize them into energy through the Kreb's cycle, but glucose fragments must be present. Let me repeat this, glucose fragments (carbs) must be present to burn body fat for energy through the very efficient Kreb's cycle within every cell; but it isn't the only way. If glucose isn't available, fatty acids can combine with each other to form ketone bodies which can also be used by most cells (with the exception of the brain and nervous system) for energy conversion. The rate of body fat usage for energy can be great using this method of diet but the problems with this mechanism are many.

Ketogenic dieting may be effective only if fat intake isn't too excessive. Remember, adipose cells are just waiting to suck in new triglycerides to store after meals. The two greatest problems for bodybuilders are that carbs are the most protein-sparing nutrient we eat. If carbs are too low for too long, you'll lose muscle no matter how much protein you eat, period! Also, the brain and nervous system can only use glucose, not ketone bodies, for energy. Low energy and less than optimal nervous system efficiency for muscle contractions leave workouts low-key, weak, and less effective. So, ketogenic dieting certainly allows you to burn more fat because of the immense carb deficit, but increasing fat intake too much will cause a great deal of fat storage. Two steps forward, two steps back. This coupled with low energy workouts and muscle loss isn't the best form of dieting for bodybuilders. Those who have successfully employed this type of dieting, I can only think how good they would look if they dieted "correctly."

So, what's the take home message about fat? If you're in a maintaining, isocaloric stage of non-dieting, you can successfully eat 30% or more of your calories from fat sources without a problem though I would chose approximately 20% so more protein and/or carbs can be consumed. The key is the word, isocaloric, or eating the same amount of total calories that your body uses for energy so that whatever ratios you chose, you won't store new body fat. If you're dieting for a contest you can save yourself from taking too many steps backward by cutting fat intake to 10-15% of total calories. This simply means less fat will be available for storage after meals and the amount of stored fat used between meals for energy will be coming from a faster shrinking supply. Carbohydrate control and planning is just as important as dietary fat, but in reality the two go hand-in-hand. Many people who obsess about carbs alone end up snacking on nuts, peanut butter, and other high-fat, low-carb foods only to be increasing direct fat storage from the increased fat intake. When taking in a limited amount of fat, be sure to make the most of what you get and supplement with essential fatty acid containing unsaturated fats. Don't lose site of the big picture, however, dietary fat intake is a critical part of your success, but it has to be just one perfect piece of a perfect comprehensive plan to work!!