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## How to Determine Your Calorie Needs

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**Yes, calories count. But your daily requirement is unique to your body.**

Calories. In some diets they are a forbidden word, in others they're the key to losing weight. Which is right? The truth is, the number of calories we need every day is determined by how much energy we require to fuel our bodies. When it comes to weight control, calories definitely count, says Janet Brill, Ph.D., R.D., L.D.N., author of *Cholesterol DOWN* and professor of health and fitness at the University of Miami. "But no two people have the same caloric needs," she adds. How do you determine your figure?

It depends partly on factors you can't control. Age has an impact on caloric needs, because as the body ages its metabolism slows down, meaning it requires fewer calories. Muscle mass also decreases with age, and because muscle requires about three times more calories than fat, less muscle translates into fewer calories needed to keep the body going, Brill says.

Gender also plays a role; women, unfortunately, tend to need fewer calories than men. And people with smaller builds need fewer calories.

The factor you can change? Your activity level, which includes not only deliberate exercise like lifting weights and running but also your daily routine. The more active you are during the day, the more calories you burn. "If you sit behind a desk all day, you can't eat as much as you could if you were walking around the office or grocery store or even playing with your kids at the playground," says Joan Salge Blake, M.S., R.D., L.D.N., registered dietitian and nutrition professor at Boston University. And if you build muscle through weight-bearing exercise, you'll fight the muscle loss that happens with age, keeping your metabolism up.

### Doing the Math

To find your caloric needs, use an online calorie calculator. Visit [mypyramidtracker.gov](http://mypyramidtracker.gov) for a calculator that gives you an in-depth look at your energy balance, based on your food intake and activity during the course of a day. (You'll need to create a free profile.) To find out roughly how many calories you burn doing different types of exercise, try an [online calorie counter](#).

Or ballpark your caloric needs using the following method, says Nancy Clark M.S., R.D., C.S.S.D., author of *Nancy Clark's Sports Nutrition Guidebook*.

Determine your resting metabolic rate (RMR) by multiplying your healthy weight by 10 calories per pound (22 calories per kilogram). If you're overweight, use an adjusted weight that's halfway between your desired weight and your current weight. For example, if you weigh 160 pounds but your healthy weight is 120 pounds, use 140.

If you're moderately active throughout the day, add about 50% of your RMR. Add 20% to 40% if you're sedentary and 60% to 80% of your RMR if you're very active, Clark says. For example

- A person weighing 120 pounds needs approximately 1,200 RMR calories and 600 more calories for moderate activity during the day (cleaning the house, running errands, working, and so on).
- Add additional calories for deliberate exercise such as aerobics, biking, using a treadmill, lifting weights, and so on.

The result:

1,200 RMR + 600 daily activity calories + 400 purposeful exercise calories

= 2,200 total calories/day.

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