Should You Count Your Macros?

A macro/micro-specific diet is an approach to nutrition that may help you optimize your health and athletic performance.

Unlike most diets, a nutrition plan designed around your body's unique macronutrient and micronutrient needs isn't necessarily intended for weight loss. Athletes measure and manage their intake of macronutrients (protein, fat, and carbohydrates) to help gain muscle, reduce body fat, improve their speed, or increase their endurance. Could this dietary approach help you reach your fitness goals?

Your ideal macronutrient count is as unique as your fingerprint.

"Every athlete's needs and likes are so different that you really must individualize it," says Kyle Bellamy, director of football nutrition and performance for the Miami Hurricanes football team. "It is important to educate athletes on what each macro is and why it is beneficial to them as athletes."

The foundational principles of macros/micros are that carbs provide or replenish energy, and protein helps build muscle and support recovery. Beyond that, it's essential to learn when to incorporate, increase, or decrease them based on your needs and goals.

Athletes, for example, need to eat according to their schedules: competition days, low-, medium-, and high-
intensity training days, and the off-season.

Bellamy may determine how many grams of carbohydrates his players need on the days just before a competition, on game day, the day after a game, and throughout the week to encourage recovery and enhance performance. He can then make recommendations for what their meal plans include at those times.

"Knowing what they need from a macro and caloric standpoint in the off-season allows us to put together a plan to develop the requisite amount of body weight or lean muscle mass they desire," he says. "But, we will not tell an athlete that they need to have, say, 750 grams of carbohydrates each day."

Bellamy is not a big believer in tracking macros daily, which is typically done with the help of an app that determines the macro/micro values of each meal and counts them throughout the day as you log what you eat. This requires measuring the weight or volume of your food.

"I think this method tends to do more harm than good," he says. "We are so quick to run to fad diets for a quick fix. But, what people don't want to do is sustain a healthy lifestyle founded on quality sleep, regular exercise, and whole food nutrition."

Focus on whole foods.

Instead, Bellamy supports a whole foods lifestyle for both elite athletes and average adults seeking to improve their overall health and fitness. "If you're eating fruits, vegetables, lean proteins, and whole grains, you'll get the essential micronutrients your body requires. And athletes can get what their bodies demand from all the stress from training and competition."
An essential element of any nutrition plan is consistency.

"Being consistent is one of the biggest things that not only our athletes struggle with, but the population as a whole," Bellamy says. "You cannot restrict yourself to a nutrition lifestyle you can't adhere to. That's why we preach the 80/20 rule."

The 80/20 approach to nutrition leaves room for "cheat" meals. To eat this way, you make good dietary choices that support your goals 80% of the time. For the remaining 20%, you can occasionally have more indulgent foods and beverages if you want.

"The psychological effects that can take place when you don't allow yourself to have the foods you're craving at times can lead to stress on the body that could be harmful," Bellamy says. "Go ahead, have that food you're craving. It gives your brain a break and makes you feel good. Remember, this is a lifestyle that you will hopefully carry for the rest of your life, and you can't restrict for the rest of your life!"

Avoid bad information. Ask an expert.

To leverage your nutrient intake and reach your health and fitness goals, speak with a professional first. They can identify any vitamin or mineral deficiencies, discuss your food preferences, calculate your daily caloric needs, and create a nutrition plan that considers any dietary limitations like vegetarianism or lactose or gluten intolerance.

"I think anyone serious about their goals and making healthy changes should consult a nutritionist or dietitian. They will guide you down the path of building that healthy lifestyle and give you the tools to succeed," Bellamy says. "There is so much bad information out there that contradicts each other. It's time for us to give simple, sustainable health and wellness guidelines and make that the foundation of health in
No matter what kind of diet, nutrition, and exercise program you choose to follow, seeing real results takes time. "You should allow for that time to occur," Bellamy says. "That isn't what people want to hear, and it's the reason many people stop exercising or prioritizing their nutrition.

"That's not to say you won't see the progress and start to hit some goals along the way. Physically, it takes time, and this is where the consistency comes in. Mentally, you'll feel results right away. You will have more energy, be in a happier mood, and receive numerous other benefits."

Prior to starting any new nutrition plan, ensure your primary care sports medicine physician screens you for any underlying metabolic disease. This includes hypertension, diabetes as well as kidney disease. The sports medicine provider can work with a certified dietician and nutritionist to ensure we are optimizing your overall health.

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Are morning or evening workouts better?

In recent years, a flurry of research has highlighted an interesting bit of science. Morning workouts seem to have a edge over working out at other times of the day. There are different reasons, including avoiding the heat of the day. Learn more.