



Clarity or Confusion

Take a look at menus in various cities around the United States and you'll notice more numbers than just the prices. Calories are now showing up on more and more menus offering us additional information when deciding which foods to choose. Despite seeing calories more often, not all of us are totally clear on what calories are and what we should do with them. According to the 2013 IFIC Food and Health Survey, 69% of Americans think about how many calories they take in at least some of the time but only 30% knew that all calories contribute to your weight in the same way.



What is a calorie?

Calories can seem complex, but they don't really need to be. They are simply a unit of measure, similar to an ounce or an inch. They measure how much energy we get from food and how much energy we burn doing different activities. Keeping the two in balance is the key to maintaining a healthy weight.



How many calories do you need?

When choosing what to eat and drink, it's important to get the right mix - enough nutrients, but not too many calories. Free tools like the Supertracker at choosemyplate.gov or the MyFitnessPal app can help you figure out how many calories you need. They also allow you to track your daily food and exercise calories.



What's the difference between food and exercise calories?

Looking at a label of a granola bar, you may see that it has 190 calories. Walking on the treadmill for 30 minutes, you may get a report that says you have burned 190 calories. What is the difference between the two? Nothing. Both are measures of energy. The food calories are the energy you take in and the exercise calories are the energy you burned doing the work of walking. In addition to the calories you burn exercising, you use a certain number of calories throughout the day both while awake and asleep. When you add up the calories you burn and compare to the calories you take in, the balance will determine what happens with your weight.



REFERENCES:

1. 2013 Food & Health Survey: Consumer Attitudes toward Food Safety, Nutrition & Health. International Food Information Council Foundation. Accessed June 14, 2013 from <http://www.foodinsight.org/foodandhealth2013.aspx>.
2. MyPlate and the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans available at <http://www.choosemyplate.gov>.
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