Calories: All Calories are Not Created Equal

The most effective way to maintain a healthy weight and metabolic function is to consume foods and beverages that are rich in nutrients relative to their calories. It is also key to reduce or avoid high-calorie foods and beverages without nutritional value. Foods and beverages that contain added sugar, salt, and refined grains often have low nutrient value and are high in calories. These calories are metabolized differently and have negative impacts on health, weight, and abdominal obesity.

Metabolic Syndrome

Maintaining a lower body mass index (BMI) is generally a healthy strategy. Higher BMIs are associated with the features of metabolic syndrome.

Metabolic syndrome occurs when a person has three or more of the following:

- Abdominal obesity
- High triglycerides (fats in blood)
- High cholesterol
- High blood pressure
- Elevated blood glucose (blood sugar levels)

All of those conditions increase the risk for heart disease, diabetes, and stroke.

Regardless of your weight, healthy eating is important. Even people with BMIs in the normal range can have metabolic health issues:

- 80% of people with a BMI in the obese range have some or all of the features of metabolic syndrome.
- 40% of people with a BMI in the normal range have some or all of them.

Calories

Your body needs certain nutrients to function. When you fill up your body with calories that don't have nutritional value, your body is still hungry and requires more food. It is not enough to eat the right number of calories. You must eat nutrient-dense calories to support health.

Nutrient density measures the nutrients that a food provides in relation to the energy (calories) it provides. The fewer the calories and the more nutrients (such as vitamins, minerals, or fiber) the food provides, the higher its nutrient density.

"I lied on my Weight Watchers list. I put down that I had three eggs… but they were Cadbury chocolate eggs." Caroline Rhea

Your body gets its energy source from carbohydrates (sugars and starches), proteins, and fats — and alcohol for those who consume it.

Their energy density is as follows:

- Four calories per gram for carbohydrates and proteins
- Nine calories per gram for fats
- Seven calories per gram for alcohol

By reducing consumption of fats and alcohol, and shifting consumption to proteins and carbohydrates, fewer calories are consumed. However, you must also take into consideration that all calories are not created equal.

Sugar

Sugar is a carbohydrate that interacts with the body differently than complex carbohydrates.

- Added sugars and sugar equivalents interact with the body to convert the sugar into fat.
- Added sugars and sugar equivalents have many names such as high-fructose corn syrup, barley malt, corn sweetener, and more. It is important to know the various names of sugar so you can avoid consuming too much added sugar.
- Added sugar should be highly moderated in food and entirely avoided in sugar-sweetened beverages.
- Added sugar is not a required nutrient with a minimum daily recommendation. It can be entirely eliminated from your diet.

Choosing Nutrient-Dense Food

Healthy eating incorporates whole grains, fruits, vegetables, protein, and healthy fats. Because all foods have a wide range of calories per serving, it is important to know these differences so you can manage your total calorie intake. The Calorie Control Council's website is where you can learn the calorie count for all types of food.

- Reduce or eliminate food that does not contribute to meeting your daily nutrient needs.
- Select foods that are lower in calories that meet your nutrient requirements.

When you make good choices that are nutrient-dense and not high in empty calories, you will feel satisfied. As your palette changes, you will find yourself managing quite well and making the shift toward healthy eating.