

THE SIMPLE GUIDE TO
FLEXIBLE DIETING



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WHAT IS FLEXIBLE DIETING?

Flexible dieting has recently become quite a hot topic in the fitness and fat loss world. Much like the idea of a cheat meal being an exciting and guilt-free experience, flexible dieting is getting thrown around a lot and offers even better benefits. Flexible dieting has even gained immense popularity on social media channels, particularly Instagram. Checkout the hashtag #flexibledietering and you will see a wide range of meals, snacks and success stories.

Okay so now you're definitely wondering what flexible dieting is all about! To avoid confusion, I'm going to keep this guide as simple as possible with clear information and minimum science.

Flexible dieting is based on an approach of looking at food on a nutritional level rather than what society would have us believe is a healthy, or unhealthy choice. What this means is that instead of looking at your favourite protein bar as a healthy snack, flexible dieting encourages you to look at the nutritional label of the protein bar to observe what nutrients you are about to consume.

You could then consider alternative food choices of equal nutritional content that is more enjoyable yet will provide the same benefits. You may for example find that you can get the exact same nutritional content from a protein shake and a mars bar – yes a mars bar, so you choose to consume that instead.

I love protein bars for convenience so I am not against them at all. In fact there are not many foods that I refuse to eat. The reason I have used a protein bar as an example is because taste is an important factor when it comes to their sales. This means flavours, fats, and sugars are generally added to make it as enjoyable as possible. However because it is labeled a *protein* bar, we naturally assume it to be a preferred healthy snack. Flexible dieting is all about changing your view of healthy or unhealthy food sources, to suitable or not suitable nutrients based on your goals.



WHY DOES FLEXIBLE DIETING WORK?

Again keeping things simple, flexible dieting works because your body uses three basic fuel sources. These fuel sources are called macronutrients and consist of protein, carbohydrate, and fat. Within each fuel source are also various types of nutrients which may be handled differently (e.g. fibre is a type of carbohydrate but does not digest like one).

In the process of digestion, your body will break down these fuel sources into their simplest form. Consider that each gram of protein you eat will break down into amino acids. Each gram of carbohydrate you eat will break down into glucose. Each gram of fat you eat will break down into fatty acids. Although there are different types of protein, carbohydrates, and fat to consider which are all of importance, the basics you need to understand is that the body does not see foods for what they are, but rather what they become when broken down.

This is the basis of why flexible dieting works. A protein bar that contains 30 grams of protein, 20 grams of carbs, and 10 grams of fat can be compared to a massive list of alternatives like something as simple as sautéed chicken with rice to something as unusual as a pop tart with a protein shake. Assuming of course that all alternatives contain the equal nutrient content: 30 grams of protein, 20 grams of carbs, and 10 grams of fat.



WHO CAN BENEFIT FROM FLEXIBLE DIETING?

Everyone. I better elaborate. Any person who is following a calorie-controlled diet with macronutrient consideration can benefit from flexible dieting. If you have been given a list of foods to eat in specific measurements on a daily basis, you are automatically following a calorie and macronutrient controlled diet. If you were to work out your total protein, carbohydrate, and fat intake for each day, you could easily make adjustments to your food sources to keep your nutrient intake consistent. If you are not following a calorie and macronutrient controlled diet for any reason other than a lack of interest in the obvious benefits, you really should consider it.

Some major benefits of flexible dieting that will stand out to many are the fact that you no longer have to wait for cheat meals to enjoy a certain food. You won't find the need to over indulge on something you normally feel restricted from eating. You won't feel guilty when you decide to mix things up and eat something that is not on your diet plan. You will have more room to be social with food and not have to carry your Tupperware of plain and boring food while you watch others enjoy what they eat. When you are not particularly hungry you can have something as simple as a protein shake to get down some fast nutrients. When you are hungrier you can have something more filling like a lean steak or chicken breast. Flexibility around your lifestyle is key.



THE RULES FOR RESULTS!

So far flexible dieting may seem rather carefree to some degree. There are however some things to consider beyond the basics of just maintaining macronutrient intake around random foods.

It is important to consider micronutrients when choosing which foods you will eat. Micronutrients are vitamins and minerals and are essential for optimal body function. They are more than often found in unprocessed whole foods such as fruits and vegetables. This is why it is important to ensure you eat a fair amount of micronutrient dense foods each day. I generally aim to have 1-2 serves of fruit per day and 2-3 serves of vegetables. I also take a multivitamin supplement as an insurance policy for any micronutrients that may be deficient in my diet on any particular day.

Another factor to consider is fibre intake. Fibre is also important for optimal body function and will not be present in a diet filled with nothing but protein shakes and doughnuts, if that's what you had in mind! Foods that are higher in fibre are generally also foods that are higher in micronutrients, which makes things quite easy. On top of my general fruit and vegetable intake, I like to include things like oatmeal in my diet, which is very high in fibre and also keeps me feeling full. Sometimes I will skip the oatmeal and have more vegetables if the other foods I eat during my day don't already provide the fibre I need.

Beyond the basics of ensuring you have adequate micronutrients and fibre each day, you also want to ensure you have a healthy balance of food sources, and more so a healthy relationship with food. Obsessing over what you are planning to eat each day is not a goal.

Following a specific meal plan for a few days and then changing things up once or twice per week is generally going to work best in the long run. Sometimes having three or four specific meal plans in rotation is also great to keep things different but still have simple structure.

MAKING SMART CHOICES

There is a popular and often hated form of dieting called IIFYM (If It Fits Your Macros). IIFYM has been demonized as an excuse to eat junk food all day simply because it fits your macronutrient goals. While this approach has come under fire a lot in the past few years, it is really no different to flexible dieting. The problem with IIFYM is that people have focused too much on eating processed and micronutrient poor foods. They forgot (or were not informed) that IIFYM still requires a lot of your food to be unprocessed whole foods to ensure sufficient intake of micronutrients and fibre. Although IIFYM and flexible dieting is essentially the same thing, flexible dieting tends to be seen as a healthier approach because IIFYM has had so many different definitions and ignorant opinions.

Making smart choices with what you eat will keep you feeling better about yourself. It will also keep the haters at bay. If you appear to be eating homemade cakes and pies all day expect people to judge you. If you appear to be eating chicken and broccoli all day expect people to judge you. Actually, if you appear to be doing anything different to other people you should expect them to judge you. But flexible dieting should not be about eating as much processed sugary treats as possible. Just like rigid clean eating should not be all about eating boring and plain whole foods. It is a misguided and impractical approach to always opt for a crazy combination of delicious treats over a simple and effective meal.

Touching lightly on the different sources of protein, carbohydrate, and fat, on the following page I have listed some key beneficial foods to include in your diet based on what they are made up of. I have also listed foods that offer little to no benefits to your body.



Protein

Highly beneficial: chicken, eggs, fish, beef, turkey, whey protein powder

Lower benefits (still good): soy protein powder, rice protein powder, plant based proteins

Carbohydrate

Highly beneficial: vegetables, fruits, grains, legumes

Little to no benefits: lollies, soft drinks, sugar loaded foods (such as cakes, cookies, ice cream)

Fat

Highly beneficial: nuts, seeds, various oils (such as macadamia, olive, flaxseed, coconut), avocado, fish oil

No benefits: trans fats (commonly found in highly processed deep fried foods)

Something to consider when deciding what to eat is moderation. Moderation is key for long-term success. This means a healthy blend of foods that society considers good for you as well as a sensible amount of processed foods, desserts and treats you enjoy from time to time. If you are a flexible dieter, you already know that the requirement to consume sufficient micronutrients and fibre will have you eating in this manner anyways.

READING NUTRITIONAL LABELS

Nutritional labels show the total calorie and macronutrient breakdown of a food item, as well as the ingredients that make up the food item. The ingredient listing is ordered by quantity. The first ingredient listed makes up the most of the food item while the last ingredient listed makes up the least. Reviewing this can help you to understand what you are putting into your body and what the food item consists of.

When reading a nutritional label, always check how many serves the food item lists. Sometimes something that is bite size can be labeled as two serves so the total nutrient content is actually double.

When reviewing a food item, looking at the “per 100g” column of the nutritional label will help you to quickly identify the breakdown of protein, carbohydrate, and fat as a total percentage rather than per serve.



TRACKING YOUR INTAKE

Since it is 2014, I'll assume you are beyond the days of reading nutritional labels on food items and doing the math. Chances are, you are looking at your mobile phone more than anything else these days, and that's just fine!

The best way to track your intake of nutrients and read nutritional information of foods is to utilise a free smartphone app called My Fitness Pal. My Fitness Pal will allow you to do everything you could ever need in regards to flexible dieting. This includes tracking and adjusting food sources to hit macronutrient, micronutrient, and fibre goals. You can also save meal plans and recipes that you have enjoyed so you can easily repeat them. Anytime you change your mind on what you had planned to eat, you can just put in the desired replacement, and find the correct measurement of that food to hit your desired macronutrient goals. You can also track your calorie intake over the weeks, which will help you to make smart adjustments if your diet is not getting you the results you would like.

If you are going to utilise flexible dieting, My Fitness Pal is in my opinion an essential tool for success.



SETTING YOUR INITIAL NUTRIENT GOALS

If you have never considered flexible dieting and also never followed a macronutrient controlled diet before, you are probably wondering where to start. You could invest in a Personalised Nutrition Plan, which is a service I offer and will provide you with a solid meal and macronutrient plan. This would be designed based on your activity levels, preferred food sources and a few other considerations.

As a good starting point, I will outline some general nutrient guidelines below. The following may get a little bit technical and math focused.

Deciding on the overall amount of calories you will consume on a daily basis can be worked out with a simple activity multiplier. This will be used to multiply your body weight (in pounds) by your assumed level of activity (10-15). 10 being the lowest activity level and 15 being the highest. If you feel that you are fairly active try 12 as a starting point. An example equation would be $200\text{lb} \times 12 = 2,400$ calories.

Moving on to your fat intake, this is based on your overall calories rather than your weight. A healthy percentage of fat is generally 20-35% of total calories. Depending on where your calories are to start with, I would generally give a lower calorie diet a higher fat percentage and a higher calorie diet a lower fat percentage. This is something you can decide. An example equation would be $2,400 \times 0.25 = 600$ calories from fat (67 grams of fat per day).

An effective protein intake is based on your total body weight, taking into consideration your lean body mass. If you are quite overweight then these numbers may be higher than really needed. I generally suggest 1-1.5g of protein per pound of body weight. An example equation would be $200\text{lb} \times 1.2 = 240$ grams of protein per day.

The last macronutrient to work out is of course carbohydrate. Because carbohydrate is a non-essential energy source it gets the remaining calories that are not allocated to fat or protein. An example equation is $2,400 - 600$ (calories from fat) = 1,800 calories. $1,800 - 960$ (calories from protein) = 840 calories remaining which is a total of 210 grams of carbs per day.

A final consideration would be fibre intake. I like to have fibre around 15-20% of total calories from carbohydrates. An example equation would be $210 \times 0.15 = 32$ grams of fibre per day.

Below is the calorie content for each macronutrient:

Protein: 1g = 4 calories

Carbohydrate: 1g = 4 calories

Fat: 1g = 9 calories

These general nutrient guidelines are best suited to an individual who would prefer a balanced diet that doesn't come with any extreme sacrifices or quick fix methods. Often times you will meet people who are in great shape after following a quick fix fad diet. Six months later they are back to where they started or even worse.

This is because many fat loss dieting methods involve completely removing a macronutrient (like carbohydrates for example), or only allow limited food sources to be eaten. Generally it is a setup that is unrealistic for long term success as removing or limiting food types can only last so long. The more you restrict yourself from something the more appealing it will become.

Choosing to have a balanced diet based on your individual attributes is the best way to ensure consistent progression in reaching and maintaining your ideal physique. Being in full control of your food sources and making the decision of what foods you will eat each day will keep things fresh and exciting.

COMMON QUESTIONS

1. How many meals should I eat per day?

The total amount of meals you consume is generally insignificant if you are tracking macronutrients and hitting your daily goals. I personally find myself having 3-5 meals per day depending on my schedule. I would generally recommend having at least 3 meals per day and no more than 6. The reason I say no more than 6 meals is because you become much more food focused when you are constantly eating.

2. Do I need to worry about when I eat certain foods?

The most important thing to consider is to have protein with each meal, which has a few benefits. In regards to eating carbs at night, this is not a problem at all. I would generally recommend that you eat your carbs around workouts if it has a psychological affect to your training intensity.

3. What if I don't have a smartphone to use My Fitness Pal?

If you don't have a smartphone (iPhone, Samsung S4, etc), you can still track and manage your nutrient intake via the My Fitness Pal website. This is not as convenient as the app but still works quite well.

4. Do I need to track everything I eat all the time?

Being a human and not a machine, there will always be situations where you can't accurately measure your nutrient intake because of variables such as eating at restaurants, special occasions, having a night out with friends, etc. You can however still be mindful of what you are consuming and make mental notes of what would be most suitable to eat or drink. Often times when I am in this situation I will put a good estimate of what I ate into my fitness pal and just track it. Sure I haven't weighed each food item but I have reduced the margin of error.

5. Where can I learn more about flexible dieting?

This guide is very basic and you may be looking for some more in-depth science based information. One of the best books to read is “A Guide To Flexible Dieting”, by Lyle McDonald. There are also great articles and blog posts online that will come up on a simple Google search. Look for content by Alan Aragon, Eric Helms, Layne Norton, and Lyle McDonald, who are all respected experts in the field of nutrition science.

6. What do I do if I have eaten all of my food too early in the day?

If you eat all of your food too early in the day and you find yourself hungry, just have another meal. Life isn't that serious. But as you learn to spread out your food according to your schedule, your hunger will reduce as your body adapts to less frequent meals. Try to get to a point where you are much more consistent with your daily nutrient intake and not eating everything at once.

7. How long should I follow this method of eating?

Flexible dieting is not really a temporary method or a short-term plan. It is a simple and effective way of tracking what you are eating and also manipulating your intake of specific nutrients to reach optimal results of muscle gain and/or fat loss. You do not have to track and weigh food for the rest of your life but it is so easy to do. I can't think of a reason not to.



KEY NOTES

- ▶ Look at food as nutrients rather than healthy or unhealthy
- ▶ Make suitable macronutrient goals
- ▶ Track macronutrient intake
- ▶ Eat plenty of micronutrient dense foods
- ▶ Track fibre intake
- ▶ Utilise My Fitness Pal
- ▶ Eat a wide variety of foods
- ▶ Fit your meals around your schedule, not your schedule around your meals
- ▶ Enjoy the many benefits of this balanced approach to nutrition

Setting Up My Fitness Pal

When you download the My Fitness Pal smartphone app it will take you through a setup process. The setup will ask you questions about your weight, activity levels and age to determine a calorie and macronutrient intake suitable to reach your chosen goal from the list of choices.

It is important to note that the macronutrient intake suggestions are formed from the recommended daily intakes based on a flawed food pyramid. What this means is that the macronutrient numbers suggested are not suitable for an individual looking to build muscle and lose body fat. The general recommendations listed on page 12 will give you a better approach geared towards a weight training individual.

You can change the generic set nutrient targets by logging into your profile on a desktop computer. Alternatively you can just disregard the suggested targets and still track and hit your personal nutrient goals.

FINAL WORDS

If you are brand new to flexible dieting, I am sure you have now downloaded My Fitness Pal and had made a few calculations to set up your initial calories and macronutrients. Exciting stuff!

Nutrition is a strong personal passion of mine. When I started weight training back in 2004, I very quickly realised that food plays the biggest role in how my body responds to my training. I tried various different diets. I ate tuna for years because I believed I had to and to be honest, I didn't even enjoy it. I have tried the bulking and cutting phases, a long list of supplements, and specialised eating plans.

With my history of researching and implementing muscle-building strategies, I can honestly say that none of what I have done previously makes as much sense as flexible dieting. When I look back at the diets that I have previously followed, I was automatically using a macronutrient controlled structure because I weighed my food consistently. However the difference being that I was eating foods I believed I had to eat. I was avoiding foods I believed would destroy my progress. I was timing my meals, which made me more food focused than anything and created an obsessive relationship with food.

Right now I am the happiest, healthiest, and leanest I have ever been with much better balance in life. I look forward to hearing of your success as you endeavor to follow a similar path.

You can share your progress and follow me on:

Instagram @**biggydee**

Facebook.com/**denversteyn**

and visit my personal website **www.denversteyn.com**

Be sure to tag your #flexibledietering activity on Instagram with #denversteyn as I too will be sharing the same journey.