

Nothing Tastes as Good as Lean Feels

By Paul Timmons, CPT, NSCA

My mom has a sign in her kitchen that reads, “Nothing tastes as good as thin feels.” I have substituted lean for thin, since too many negative connotations are associated with the word thin. However, I do think that phrase is very accurate and a powerful tool in the quest to have a leaner physique.

We have previously discussed strength and cardiovascular training as they relate to body fat reduction. However, nutrition is the most important and probably the most difficult component. I would like to think that strength and cardio training can be fun. It is very satisfying to see one’s fitness improve. The process of building a better, stronger more aerobically fit you is a very gratifying experience. However, not eating what and how much you want to eat is not fun. I have seen hundreds of people in the gym over the years make an effort to decrease their percentage of body fat. And the biggest stumbling block has always been nutrition. I have also witnessed, and been a part of, many success stories and have discovered some recurring themes.

I have never seen a significant success story in the weight loss arena that did not keep an accurate food journal. I have worked with several clients who have lost over 100 pounds and they all kept journals. We really cannot have any discussion about calorie intake until we have an accurate calorie consumption figure. The average person underestimates his daily caloric intake by about a third. So if you think you are eating 2,000 calories per day, you are probably eating 3,000. There are so many hidden calories in all of our food and our typical servings sizes go far beyond are needs. The basic premise here is intake versus expenditure. If we expend more then we take in, we generally lose body fat.

However, many who are focused on this goal go too far in the other direction and severely limit their calorie intake and initially lose weight. Those who venture down this path send the body into a starvation mode and only slow the metabolism. However in either scenario, we cannot accurately identify the problem without a journal. The simple act of recording everything you eat, including total calories, fat, carbohydrates and protein grams is a very valuable learning experience.

Several years ago, I did a bodybuilding competition. I thought I had a pretty good handle on my intake and was very conscious of what I ate on a daily basis. For the purpose of a six-week competition diet, I weighed, measured and recorded every single thing I ingested. The learning process started on the first morning of the first day. I was making the same protein shake that I always had for breakfast, protein powder and two tablespoons of peanut butter, or so I thought. I would usually grab a big spoon and scoop out two heaping globs of all natural peanut butter and plop it in the blender. It turns out that my two scoops were actually six tablespoons of leveled, measured peanut butter! I was hundreds of calories off before I even walked out the door.

I do not think it is necessary for one to log food forever; that is no way to live. However, I do believe it is essential for the short term. The knowledge one will acquire in a short period of time will be indispensable.

Another important concept is to never allow yourself to get really hungry. The act of processing food requires energy and revs your body’s metabolism. So if we eat small, frequent meals, the body tends to be buzzing all day long. If we go too long between meals, or restrict intake too much, we will eventually become ravenous and eat much more then our body requires. I would suggest a small meal about every three to four hours.

I am not a nutritionist or a doctor and am not qualified to discuss the merits of low carb diets and the complex interworkings of how our bodies process fat versus carbs. I do know what I have seen in 12 years as a fitness professional. I have witnessed people get very lean eating carbs and seen the same results in those that abstained from carbs. I do think calories matter more. And in many ways, low carb diets become lower calorie diets and consequently produce weight loss. When the average person overeats, what do they typically consume? Pizza? Doughnuts? Ice cream? It seems like we all have a food in which we tend to over indulge. And the vast majority of the time that food is high in carbs. We will eat a whole box of cereal but will not eat three pounds of tuna. No one binges on tuna. So if we eliminate the trigger food, we reduce calorie intake.

In addition, fat and protein tend to be very satiating, and we know carbs tend not to be very filling. So we are now eating foods that fill us up and do not trigger binges. No wonder people tend to lose weight on these diets.

It would seem that not all carbs are created equal. I do believe that we are better off when we choose complex carbs over simple. An oversimplification of this concept is avoiding carbs that are white. White rice and white bread have had many valuable properties processed away. In addition, refined sugar is certainly something to avoid on a consistent basis. It contains little to no nutritional value and does not provide any satiating qualities.

Therefore, using this logic, we should be able to eat with discipline and have whatever we want, just not to excess. I have maintained a body fat percentage of between five and seven percent for years and eat a healthy balance of carbs, proteins and fats. It can be done and is not as complicated as we tend to make it out to be. I did not say it is easy, just not complicated.

Another lesson that I learned from the bodybuilding experience was that you can eat buckets of broccoli and still get lean. I had not been a big vegetable eater previously. We are all certainly aware of the nutritional benefits associated with vegetables. However, they are, for the most part, extremely low in calories and high in satiating fiber. No wonder Weight Watchers does not even count vegetables in their point system.

So how many calories should we consume in a day? This is a complex question and many variables factor into the mix. However, we do have methods to estimate your body's basal metabolic rate, or how many calories one burns at rest. This is the fuel required to maintain your weight if you sat on the couch all day. Once we factor in your personal activity level, we are able to calculate a starting point for the food journal.

A formula I frequently use is to take your weight in kilograms, which would be pounds x .45 and multiply that times 24. This is your basal metabolic rate, or the day on the couch caloric needs. Now we need to incorporate your daily activity level. If you do very little and have a desk job, add 30% to that number, as you would fall into the light activity category. For those in the medium activity category, add 40%, and for heavy activity, add 50%. Granted these ranges are extremely subjective, but this gives us an estimate of our personal needs.

For example a 140-pound woman would have a basal metabolic rate of 1,512. If she is moderately active, that number goes up to 2,116 calories per day. This would be the amount of calories necessary to maintain her current weight. If body weight reduction is the goal, let's start with a 10% reduction in calorie intake. So our magic number is 1,905 calories per day. It has been my experience that this number sounds high to most people initially. However, as I said we all tend to eat more than we think. And when all the portions are weighed and measured, this is not a lot of food.

Now having said all that, it is important to remember that life is to be enjoyed. Food is one of life's many pleasures and some indulgence is part of a happy life. No one wants to spend the rest of his life logging, weighing and measuring everything he eats. We have to allow ourselves a break from time-to-time. The problem tends to be excess. We are certainly a society all too familiar with the concept that more is better. Enjoy the foods you like, and use them as rewards for achieving life's goals. Just do so with the concept of moderation in mind.

So start your food journal now. And remember these important concepts: eat small frequent meals, focus on foods that are filling and have more nutritional value, such as lean meats and dark green vegetables. Not all carbs are created alike; focus on complex, less refined versions, brown rice, whole wheat pasta, etc., and eat simple refined sugar very sparingly.

Nutrition is the hardest part of the fat loss equation for most people, but any goal worth achieving takes effort and sacrifice. And you will get it all back when you look in the mirror and see yourself as another success story. When you weigh that satisfaction versus how good the binge foods really taste, the decision is an easy one. And remember Mom's sign, nothing tastes as good as lean feels.