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## **Confused about calories and fat grams!** <sup>[1]</sup>

Hey Alice,

I'm really confused about calories and fat. I watch what I eat but don't really know what to look for! Should I be counting calories or fat grams? Or percentages of calories from fat? What are calories and fat anyways????????? PLEASE HELP!

### **Answer**

Dear Reader,

You're on the right track — being mindful of calories and fat is a key part of maintaining a balanced diet. A calorie is the standard unit for measuring energy released from nutrients, such as fat, protein, and carbohydrates. The amount of calories consumed from these and other sources contribute to weight loss or gain. Whereas proteins and carbohydrates have only four calories of energy per gram, fat has nine. The higher calorie content of fat may seem off-putting, but keep in mind that fat's an essential component of a balanced diet. It's used as an energy source, as tissue building blocks, as protection and insulation for internal organs, and for the transport and absorption of fat-soluble vitamins (e.g., A, D, E, and K). Whatever method you decide to use, eating enough quality fat and calories are vital to fueling your body.

So, how are calorie needs calculated? Generally speaking, 1200 to 1400 calories per day is considered low, and anything above 2400 is considered high for the average person. These numbers are impacted by weight, age, and physical activity, among other factors. To find out how many calories may be ideal for your body type and lifestyle, check out [MyPlate](#) <sup>[2]</sup>. In order to calculate fat intake, the U.S. has standardized nutrition labels that list the percentage daily value for saturated fats based on a 2000 calorie diet. The percentage can also be calculated by dividing the number of calories from fat by the total number of calories and multiply by 100. In any case, it's wise to calculate these numbers based on the serving size listed on pre-packaged foods. For example, ice cream may have seven grams of fat per serving, but the container may contain four servings, which means the entire tub has 28 grams of fat. That being said, not all calories are created equal. Where calories come from has as much of an impact on your health as how many you consume.

While you may be mindful of fat, calories, or both, it might be easiest to focus on the total number

of calories consumed and the type of fat consumed. According to the most recent dietary guidelines, it's recommended that saturated fat make up no more than ten percent of total daily calories. Ultimately, when more calories are consumed than expended, regardless of the source, the unused calories will be stored as excess body fat. While it's best to eat high-fat foods in moderation, it's worth knowing your way around low-fat and fat-free foods. Usually, low-fat foods contain three grams of fat or less per serving and fat-free foods contain half a gram of fat or less per serving. There are also "light" and "reduced fat" versions with "light" indicating that each serving contains 25 percent less fat per serving than the regular version, and "reduced" meaning 50 percent less. However, just because these foods contain less fat doesn't necessarily mean they contain fewer calories or are "healthier" than their regular counterparts; in fact, some of these options may contain more sugar or sodium compared to the regular version. Eating a full fat yogurt may taste better and be more satisfying than one that's fat-free, causing you to consume fewer calories overall.

Finally, while being mindful of what you consume can be beneficial, you may find that focusing on a balanced diet and overall healthy pattern of eating is easier than specifically counting calories and fat, and you may still have the same health benefits. If you're still trying to figure out what to eat, working with a registered dietitian may help you figure out the balance that works best for your body and lifestyle. If you'd like more diet and nutrition facts to chew on, hop on over to the [Go Ask Alice! Nutrition & Physical Activity](#) [3] archives.

Alice!

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