Where to Start?

By Michael Lipowski, CFP

Nutrition is seemingly the most confusing aspect of fitness and for good reason. There's a tremendous amount of information, most of it conflicting and contradictory, but as long as people buy into it will continue to make it into fitness magazines and best-selling books. Most diets tend to focus primarily on one or two components of nutrition, touting the benefits or sometimes the evils of these components. In the process they tend to ignore or downplay other aspects that may be just as pertinent to a successful diet. There is one major problem that all these diets have in common. None of them ever takes the individual into account. There is no 'single' diet that will work for everyone, just as there is no 'single' exercise program that will work for everyone. Your diet should be designed based upon your body type, metabolism, activity level, needs, goals and preferences. Understanding that the best diet is a personalized diet, the next question is where to start?

The reason why every fad diet that anyone has ever tried, may have worked to some extent, was because they all had one thing in common…a caloric deficit. A calorie is defined as a unit of measurement used to express the energy value of food.[1] Each day the body requires a certain amount of nutrients for energy, and this energy is supplied by the foods we consume. A caloric deficit is created when your body uses more energy than is supplied. So for example, if an individual requires 1,800 units of energy (calories) a day but only consumes 1,600, they are in a caloric deficit.

The above example is precisely the situation that an individual interested in fat-loss desires. With 200 calories un-accounted for, the body must find another way to supply this energy. This is when the body will look to its fat stores to supply what it needs. With that said the exact opposite holds true in that, if more calories are consumed than can be utilized, the body will store these calories as fat. When our 1,800 calorie/day individual takes in 2,100 the excess is stored away as fat for another day when it might need it.

If everything up to this point seems simple and basic it's probably because it is. Unfortunately we are just scraping the surface and this nutrition thing can get very complicated as we begin to explore it further. For now just remember that the formula

[1] Definition from Avery's Sports Nutrition Almanac, Burke, Edmund R. & Gastelu, Daniel

for fat-loss is this: calories in < calories out.

In order to consume fewer calories than you will expend, you first need to know how many calories you need to begin with. What you need to know is your Basal Metabolic Rate (BMR), which is the minimum caloric requirement needed to sustain life in a resting individual. Essentially, it is the amount of energy expended by the body if you were to remain in bed asleep all day. Calculating your BMR does not account for your level of daily activity or how much of your current body weight is muscle or fat. It is best that your BMR be used only as, an estimation or a means of establishing the limit to which you should decrease your calories.

Harris Benedict Formula for Basal Metabolic Rate (BMR)

Men
BMR = 66.5 + (13.7 x wt. in kilograms) [1kg = 2.2 lbs.] + (5.0 x height. in cm) [1cm= 0.394 inches] – (6.8 x age)

Women
BMR = 655.1 + (9.56 x wt. in kilos) + (1.85 x ht. in cm) – (4.7 x age)

*The following addition to this formula may be helpful in determining your BMR with your activity level as a consideration.

--If you are Sedentary - little or no exercise
Calorie-Calculation = BMR X 1.2
--If you are Lightly Active (light exercise/sports 1-3 days/week)
Calorie-Calculation = BMR X 1.375
--If you are Moderately Active (moderate exercise/sports 3-5 days/week)
Calorie-Calculation = BMR X 1.55
--If you are Very Active = BMR X 1.725 (hard exercise/sports 6-7 days/week)
Calorie-Calculation = BMR X 1.725
--If you are Extra Active (very hard daily exercise/sports & physical job or 2X day training)
Calorie-Calculation = BMR X 1.9

Having established your daily caloric intake you've taken the first step to obtaining a leaner physique, but not all calories are created equal. Soon we'll explore the role of protein, carbohydrates and fat in your quest to a better body.