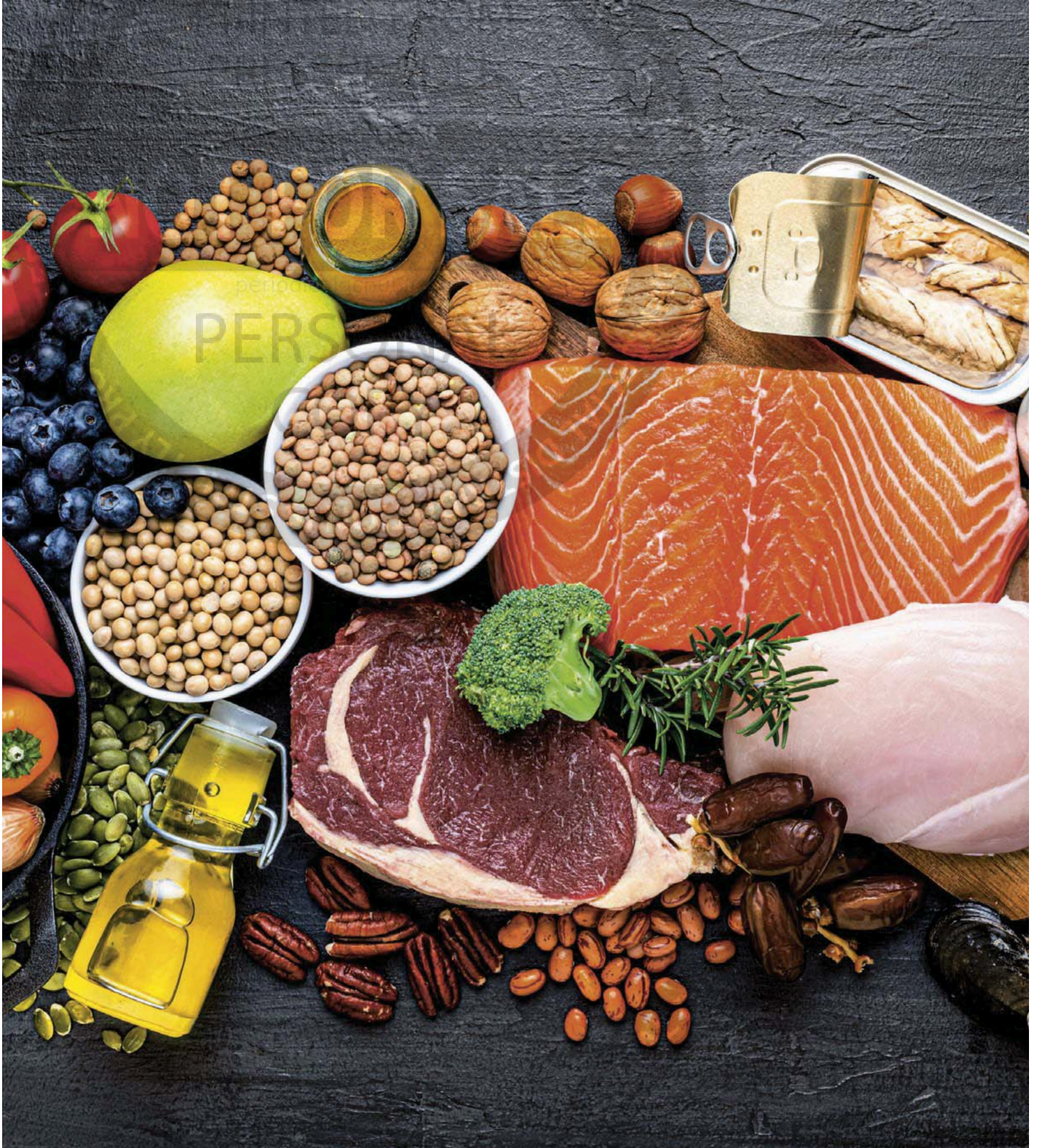


- Diet / Nutrition

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Master your macros

Want to lose weight, but feel like it's a chore? Forget counting kilojoules and start monitoring macronutrients instead. Here's the lowdown on this popular – and much easier – weight loss system.

BY MARYGRACE TAYLOR AND
MADELEINE HAASE

Dieting to lose weight is one thing – and there are plenty of ways to go about it – but the macro diet, specifically, is more than a weight loss strategy. Counting macros instead of kilojoules helps you better understand your food, ensuring that you eat nutrient-dense meals to fuel your body and mind while potentially helping you lose excess weight in the process. So, how does counting macros for weight loss work?

Serious athletes have long paid attention to their macronutrients, or macros, as a way to optimise their performance. But, more recently, macro-focused diets (also known as flexible dieting) have become popular among fitness enthusiasts and people who want to keep their weight in check. ▶

MACRO DIET WEIGHT LOSS

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The macro diet, not to be confused with the macrobiotic diet (which is an unconventional restrictive diet based on ancient principles), is all about counting the percentage of macronutrients – those being carbohydrates, fats and proteins – in the diet and hitting a specific percentage target of the three, says dietitian Melissa Prest.

So, what is the macro diet all about and is it something worth trying? Over the following pages, we provide the answers to all of your questions – including exactly how to get started and what foods you should be focusing on. Let's begin!

What is the macro diet?

The idea behind the macro diet is pretty simple: Instead of staying under a kilojoule threshold, you focus on getting a certain number (typically grams) of macronutrients – protein, carbohydrates and fat – instead. Depending on your goals, you can adjust the amounts of these macronutrients you consume to slim down, build muscle or maintain your weight.

MACRO DIET BENEFITS

There are several benefits in counting macros versus counting kilojoules. First, it may help you make more nutritious choices by forcing you to consider the quality of the food you consume. For instance, let's say you're following a kilojoule-counting diet and are allotted 836 kilojoules (200 calories) for your afternoon snack; that means you could eat something healthy, such as an apple and a tablespoon of almond butter, but it also means you could consume the same kilojoule amount of a non-nutritious snack to satisfy your cravings. When you're counting macros, you need to choose a snack that would fit your macro plan.

And if weight loss is your goal, then counting macros has one major benefit: People following a macro diet tend to eat a little more protein than the average eater. "Protein requires more energy to digest and use than carbs or fat, plus it dampens your appetite," explains dietitian Georgie Fear. So, a macro diet could help you feel more full between meals.

Perhaps the biggest benefit of a macro diet is having the flexibility to choose foods you truly enjoy, as long as it fits your macro plan. Finding a good balance of nutrient-dense foods is important, but opting for an IIFYM (if it fits your macros) plan allows you the freedom for an occasional indulgence, which, for many people, makes it easier to stick to in the long run.

■ WHO CAN BENEFIT FROM COUNTING MACROS?

In theory, macros dieting can help you lose weight, but it's not any more effective than counting kilojoules or even just paying attention to your portions, Georgie says. And, in practice, it can be a lot of work.

Still, it's worth trying if the whole puzzle-piecing aspect sounds like fun to you. "If it's enjoyable as a game, then macros counting helps someone to continue eating in a certain way when they might otherwise get bored," Georgie says. But if that kind of attention to detail feels like a chore or makes you anxious, it may be tough to maintain.

Being aware of macros, and not counting, can benefit most individuals with weight loss, notes dietitian Keri Gans. "Including protein and fat, alongside a high-fibre carb, aids in satiety – helping an individual to be less hungry," she explains.

■ WHO SHOULD NOT COUNT MACROS FOR WEIGHT LOSS?

If you're someone with an eating disorder or recovering from one, then tracking macros may not be appropriate, says Melissa.

Keri agrees that if a person has a history of an eating disorder, "it would be ill-advised to follow any diet that has restrictions or rules," she adds.

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*Focus on
high-fibre carbs,
healthy fats and
lean protein and
you'll be well on
your way!*

WHAT ARE **MACRONUTRIENTS**?

Macronutrients are the three types of nutrients that provide you with most of your energy: carbohydrates, protein and fat. Micronutrients, on the other hand, are the types of nutrients that your body uses in smaller amounts, like vitamins, minerals, antioxidants and phytochemicals.

Most foods have two or even all three different macronutrients, but they're categorised by the macronutrient of which they contain the most. For instance, chicken is a protein even though it also has some fat, and sweet potatoes are considered a carb even though they have a bit of protein.

Not all macronutrients are created equal, though. "The quality and amount of different macronutrient groups might determine if your blood sugar falls or stays stable, if you have steady energy or are all over the place, and how much you eat at a sitting," says dietitian Amy Goodson. All of those things factor into how well you're able to stick to your healthy eating plan.

Here are some healthy choices from each of the three macronutrient categories:



● **Carbohydrates:** Healthy carbs are typically high in fibre, and include wholegrains, legumes, leafy greens, potatoes and fruit.



● **Fats:** Satiating, healthy fats include olive oil, avocado, nuts and seeds, and omega 3-rich fish, such as sardines.



● **Proteins:** Good picks for healthy, lean proteins include chicken, turkey, grass-fed beef, fatty fish (such as salmon and mackerel), eggs and plant-based foods such as beans and chickpeas. ▶

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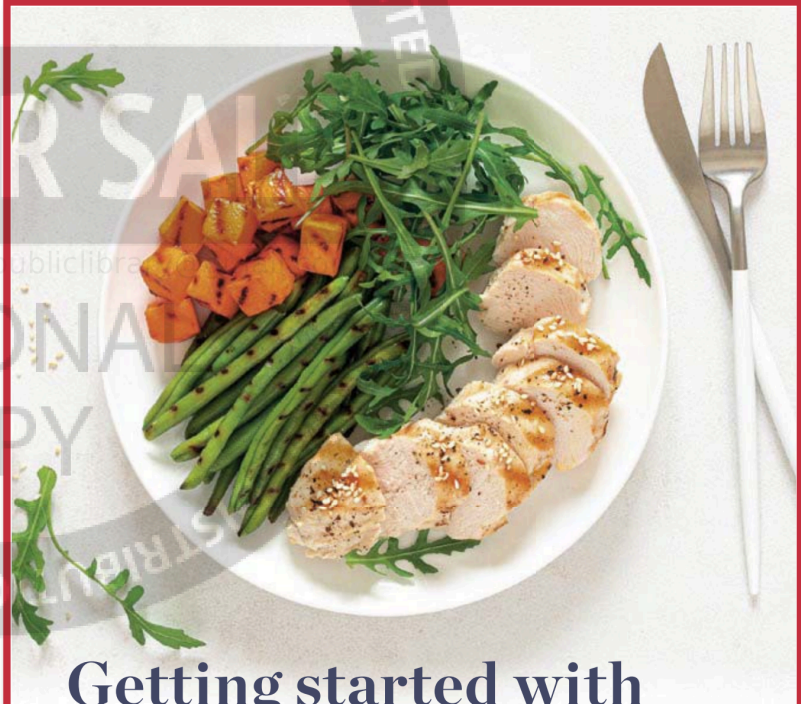
THE MINUSES OF THE MACRO DIET

In some cases, counting macros is easier than counting daily kilojoules, but not always. It can be a simple process if you're following basic guidelines, like filling a specific portion of your plate with protein, carbs and fat. But meeting particular number goals (such as aiming for X grams of protein per meal) isn't really any easier, Amy says.

As with any diet plan that focuses on counting, it can be rather time-consuming and difficult to sustain for the long term, says Keri. "For the average person, a healthy style of eating should not have to involve math skills," she adds.

The macro diet also tends to turn meal and snack time into a puzzle, which is inconvenient. "It creates a macros Tetris game of trying to find something to fill in exactly what you need for one macro without going over on the others," Georgie says. That can be tough since very few foods are made up of just one macro. While a cup of plain, low-fat Greek yoghurt packs 20 grams of protein, for instance, it also has 8 grams of carbs and 4 grams of fat.

Finally, the macro diet can exacerbate or lead to disordered eating. Placing a lot of attention on measuring, counting and recording macros can fuel obsessive habits around food. A macros diet may feel more restrictive as you need to hit your targets each day, explains Melissa.



Getting started with macros tracking

The whole idea of a macro diet can be overwhelming. This kind of detail-oriented tracking definitely requires commitment, and like kilojoule counting, it can be particularly challenging if you go out to eat a lot.

An easier – though less precise – alternative is to just rely on your eyeballs, Amy says. If you're looking to get your macros in and hate tracking food, a good rule of thumb is to make a little over a quarter of your plate lean protein and about a quarter of your plate wholegrains or starchy vegetables (like sweet potatoes). Fill the rest of your plate with non-starchy vegies, which, when it comes to macro counting, are considered carbs. As long as some of the items on your plate have added fat (like salad greens tossed with a vinaigrette or chicken roasted with olive oil), you don't need to worry about making a space for fat on your plate.

And if you're still hungry, fill up on more fresh vegetables, Amy says. This method won't guarantee that your macros line up with a 30/30/40 breakdown, but it'll still ensure you get a decent amount of protein at each meal and that you're not overdoing it on the starchy carbs. Just as important, it'll help keep your portions in check. Both of those things can help you reach your weight loss goals.

If you're looking to count macros for weight loss, you should consider seeking advice from a registered dietitian to help you customise the macro percentages based on your activity level, age, and goals, advises Melissa.

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HOW TO COUNT MACROS FOR WEIGHT LOSS

That depends on your age, size and activity level. "Those who work out need a different amount of carbs and protein than someone who is more sedentary," Amy says. But, generally, these ratios below are a good place to start:

- ▶ **If you exercise for an hour or less daily:** 30% protein, 30% fat, 40% carbs
- ▶ **If you exercise for one to two hours daily:** 30% protein, 25% fat, 45% carbs
- ▶ **If you exercise for more than two hours daily:** Consider talking to a sports dietitian. "You need personalisation to maintain that high physical output and lose weight safely," Georgie says.

Now that you know which macro ratio works best for your exercise routine, you can figure out the actual number of macros you need and keep track of them. Just follow these three basic steps.

1 Assess your kilojoule needs.
 Again, this depends on your age, size and activity level, as well as your weight loss goals. Use a calculator that'll factor all of this in.

2 Tally up your macros.
 Once you've got your kilojoule count, you can use your macro ratio to determine exactly how many grams of protein, fat and carbs to eat each day. This involves a little bit of math, but you can save time by using a macro calculator, like

the one from freedieting.com. Using this tool, we were able to learn that a woman eating 6276 kilojoules (1500 calories) who exercises for half an hour most days of the week would need 150 grams of carbs, 112 grams of protein and 50 grams of fat daily.

3 Use an app to track your macros.
 Now that you know how much of each macro you need, you'll have to keep track of the amounts that you're actually getting from

your meals and snacks. Just like with kilojoule counting, the easiest way to do this is with a food tracker app, Amy says. Most mobile apps that help you track and log foods should provide a macro percentage of your overall diet, says Melissa. Popular macros tracking apps include:

- My Macros+
- MyFitnessPal
- Carb Manager
- Cronometer

Using a few single-source macro foods, such as chicken (for protein), can help keep things simple.

