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## REVERSE DIET

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### **Abstract**

*Reverse dieting is pretty much what it sounds like: a diet turned upside-down. Instead of cutting calories and ramping up time spent on the treadmill, you increase metabolism by gradually adding calories back into your diet while reducing cardio. Although it sounds very simple, there's more to reverse dieting than just "eat more, do less." If you want to maximize gains in metabolic rate without storing a ton of body fat, you must be strategic and patient. This means giving your metabolism time to adjust by making slow, deliberate changes, rather than hitting the buffet every day and cutting out cardio overnight.*

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**JEL classification:** I10, I19.

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### **1. Introduction**

For those with a history of crash dieting, severe calorie restriction, or multiple failed diet attempts, jumping once more on the diet bandwagon is unlikely to yield results, and will probably do more harm than good.

Over repeated bouts of calorie restriction, your metabolism takes a beating. When you drop calories too low for too long, your body intervenes on several fronts. Most notably, it reduces the number of calories you burn throughout the day, often priming your body for surprisingly rapid weight gain.

This biological phenomenon, known as "metabolic adaptation," can really throw a wrench in your weight-loss goals. With your body continuously fighting to erase the calorie deficit necessary for fat loss, eating fewer calories than you burn can eventually become very tricky. You can only drop calories so far and increase exercise so much before that lifestyle becomes miserable, as well as impossible to maintain.

Fortunately, for anyone fighting an uphill battle against a slow metabolism, there may be a solution. It's possible to reboot metabolism and ultimately lower what's known as your "body-fat set point" – or the level of body fat your body finds easiest to maintain – through a process known as "reverse dieting."

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## 2. What is reverse diet?

Although you won't find the term in any dictionary, reverse diet is a term used within the bodybuilding and competitive weightlifting communities (aka "bro-science") to describe a period after a calorically restricted eating protocol during which you slowly work to increase calories back to a maintenance level. Using this strategy, and by assessing progress weekly and tracking increases in body fat in comparison to lean muscle mass, athletes can recover their metabolisms and increase calorie intake with minimal increase in body fat.

The theory behind the reverse diet is that after prolonged periods of restricted caloric intake the athlete's metabolism adapts to operate more efficiently. Meaning the athlete is able to operate at a lower energy expenditure and burn fewer calories. If the proper dietary adjustments aren't made to account for this slow down, the body will store those extra calories in the form of fat.

There are a few reasons to implement a reverse diet. The most common is to bring calories (and strength) back up to a healthy and sustainable level after a prolonged weight-loss diet. Whether you are a bodybuilder who has implemented a restricted diet to achieve low levels of body fat, a competitive athlete who cut calories in order to qualify for a weight class, or someone who has simply been on an extended weight-loss plan for aesthetic benefit, a reverse diet can - and, in my opinion, should - be implemented in order to slowly increase food intake to a maintenance level. For the majority of individuals, maintaining an extremely low-calorie diet is not sustainable for long-term health, happiness, and function.

A reverse diet may also be implemented to accelerate fat loss and avoid a fat-loss plateau when dieting. Although counterintuitive, this tactic can recuperate essential metabolic hormones such as T3, testosterone, and leptin, which become down regulated during extended dieting. By making small and calculated increases to calories, the metabolism is often able to adapt to the increase with a corresponding uptick in metabolic output and thermogenesis. The incremental additions in calories enable the individual's metabolism to burn more energy as a result of increased energy input.

Finally, a reverse diet may be implemented in an attempt to increase an individual's metabolic capacity and stretch the ability to intake calories while holding at a maintenance weight. Research is limited on the ability to increase the body's metabolic capacity when an individual is already consuming energy at a level to maintain bodyweight, but if effective, the benefits would be similar to a "bulk" (when an individual consumes more calories in order to increase strength and muscle mass). Except that the moderate calorie increases and regular assessments would help the athlete to avoid the unwanted body fat gain that often accompanies a bulk.



### 3. Metabolic Adaptations From Dieting

When you drastically restrict calories or lose weight, your body senses the energy gap and your departure from its body-fat set point. In a desperate attempt to erase the energy gap and put the brakes on fat loss, several body systems work together to orchestrate a reduction in metabolism:

- Your organs consume less energy.
- Your heart beats slower as sympathetic nervous system activity declines.
- Hormones that influence metabolism and appetite, such as thyroid hormone, testosterone, leptin, and ghrelin, are adversely affected.
- You burn less energy during non exercise activities, such as fidgeting, walking around the house, working, and doing chores.
- You use fewer calories to absorb and digest food because you're eating less.
- Your muscle becomes more efficient, requiring less fuel for a given amount of work.

All these changes ultimately boil down to burning fewer calories, both at rest and while working out. This sounds bleak, but luckily, metabolic adaptation is not a one-way street.

You can slow down your metabolism, but you can also speed it up! This is what the concept of reverse dieting is built upon. Many of the physiological changes that work to slow metabolism during calorie restriction can occur in the opposite direction when overeating to make metabolism faster

### 4. How to reverse diet?

You may be able to do this too by following these six steps:

#### *1. Calculate your current calories and establish starting macro targets*

To avoid jumping up in calories too quickly, you need to know how many calories you're currently eating to maintain your body weight. From there, you'll use this to establish baseline macros.

First, track everything you eat for a few days to determine your average caloric intake. Let's say it's 1,800 calories.

Second, set your protein target at 1 gram per pound of body weight. If you weigh, say, 150 pounds, your protein intake will be 150 grams of protein.

Third, subtract your protein calories from your current total-calorie goal to determine the remaining calories:

150 grams of protein x 4 calories per gram = 600 calories of protein.

1800 total calories - 600 calories from protein = 1200 remaining calories.



Take your remaining calories, and split them 40/60 or 60/40 between carbs and fat. These numbers can be manipulated, but either one of the above is a good starting place.

Let's say in this example that you love carbs, so you decide to set carbs at 60 percent and fat at 40 percent of the remaining calories.

$$1200 \times 0.6 = 720 \text{ calories from carbs}$$

$$1200 \times 0.4 = 480 \text{ calories from fat}$$

To determine your macros, divide the carb calories by 4 and fat calories by 9.

$$720 \text{ calories of carbs} / 4 \text{ calories per gram} = 180 \text{ grams of carbs}$$

$$480 \text{ calories of fat} / 9 \text{ calories per gram} = 53 \text{ grams of fat}$$

You now have your baseline macros. In this example, they are 150 grams of protein, 180 grams of carbs, and 53 grams of fat.

### *2. Decide how quickly you want to increase carbs and fat*

To figure this out, you need to ask yourself a few questions:

Do I care more about reaching a higher caloric intake than I do about gaining excess fat?

Am I trying to overcome a history of binge-eating behaviour?

Am I planning to hit the weight room hard and add muscle while I reverse?

If the answer to any of these questions is "yes," you may benefit from a more aggressive reverse. Although you'll likely gain more body fat by increasing carbs and fat quickly, you'll feel better and less deprived, you'll have more flexibility to fit in the foods you crave, and you'll be less inclined to binge. The extra calories that accompany an aggressive reverse may also give you more energy to train, allowing you to build muscle.

If you're concerned about gaining body fat, you may benefit from a more conservative reverse. For example, if you're coming off a reasonable diet where you reached your goal body weight, you may want to increase fat and carbs more slowly to better maintain your results.

### *3. Raise carbs and fat at a rate compatible with your goals*

If you've decided that a slow reverse is more in line with your goals, start by increasing your carb and fat intake by just 2-5 percent per week, depending on how concerned you are with gaining weight.

If you've decided that a fast reverse is for you, you should start by increasing your carb and fat intake by 6-10 percent per week. You may even want to increase fat and carbs by 15-25 percent the first week to give yourself a jump-start.



#### *4. Weigh yourself multiple times per week to control weight gain*

Choose 2-3 days per week, and weigh yourself first thing in the morning. Assessing your average weight change over the course of the week will help you evaluate your macro manipulations and decide on your next increase (if necessary).

If you see a large jump in weight gain over a one-week period, you may want to scale back the rate at which you're increasing your intake. On the other hand, if you maintain your current weight, or even lose slightly, bump up both carbohydrates and fat.

#### *5. Slowly reduce the time you spend doing cardio and add heavy lifting to your workout routine*

Lifting heavy 3-6 days a week is a great way to build muscle, which increases metabolism not only in the short term, but also over the long run. Long sessions of steady-state cardio do little to build muscle, and they may even interfere with muscle-building pathways.

#### *6. When you reach your desired caloric intake, stop and choose your next action*

Once you're satisfied with the amount of food you're eating, stop adding calories and go from there. If you feel good, you may want to stay at this level. If you'd like to lose weight now that your metabolism is at a better starting point, go right ahead!

But be smart about how you go about it; don't recklessly slash calories. You'll want to diet on as many calories as possible while still losing weight. Your metabolism depends upon it.

### **5. Benefits of Reverse Dieting**

The most obvious benefit is the ability to avoid the dreaded post-diet rebound. You know, the one that happens after you reach your diet goal and then stuff your face for weeks until even your socks are tight. By increasing calories incrementally, a reverse diet allows your metabolism to reignite and catch up to the surplus calories. If too many calories are introduced too soon, the body will, in essence, attempt to store these calories for the next time you expose it to an extreme calorie deficit. This can lead to rapid weight gain and potential long-term metabolic damage.

The psychological benefit of reverse dieting is vast. By controlling yourself and having a structured plan post-diet, it is less likely that you will experience the rapid weight gain and discomfort that often lead to depression and body dissatisfaction. The goal of the reverse diet is to increase calories with minimal weight gain. If done properly, it allows an easier transition from contest or competition shape to offseason maintenance eating.



Although every individual's metabolism and needs will differ, the general formula for preparing for a successful reverse diet is fairly simple. It's just a test of willpower. That said, here are some strategies to help you stay on track:

*Have a Plan:* You must have a plan ready to be implemented immediately post competition or diet. This means your celebration meals are planned and food is already prepped.

**Week One:** If you implemented a peak week, then return to the calories and macronutrient breakdown you followed the week before the beginning of your peak week (for general weight loss dieters, skip this step).

**Next:** Introduce a small calorie increase in the form of carbohydrates. The lower your calorie deficit, the more moderate your calorie increase needs to be. Likewise, women will normally need to be more cautious than men in their percentage increases. I recommend an increase of 3% calories for women and 5% increase for men as a starting point.

**Assess weight and body fat weekly:** Take assessments approximately seven days after your last calorie increase. Remain consistent with the timing (i.e. first thing in the morning before any fluid). If you don't have access to body fat assessments, then use a combination of the mirror, pictures, and a scale as gauges. If you restricted water at the end of your diet, take this into account and use the weight and pictures taken the week before your peak week to compare.

**Make weekly increases as body fat stays constant:** If body fat increases by more than 1% each week, consider holding things constant for a week before making another increase. If after two weeks the scale or body fat percentage continues to rise, you may want to pull back and find your maintenance caloric intake.

**Make small increases in fat grams:** Do this as needed to keep your dietary fats at a healthy percentage and remain at the allotted percentage in your daily diet. If you were eating an extremely low-fat diet, you may consider implementing more fats in replace of carbohydrates.

## 6. Conclusions

The first question that can be hear is "why using reverse diet?". Here is a simple answer :

- It gives you a plan

Without a plan, some people will binge, restrict, and yo-yo diet after their show or shoot. Reverse dieting gives you a plan and a structure, so you won't feel lost.

- Your body dictates the pace

With reverse dieting, you will increase your calories as your body increases in weight. You won't over estimate your maintenance calories. But if you



start eating at (presumed) maintenance straight away, it's easy to get the numbers wrong. Reverse dieting works with your body as it changes.

- It's more reliable than intuitive eating

Intuitive eating is a great concept, but it's a skill that some people don't possess yet. Maybe this was your first cutting diet, and you don't have anything to compare it to. Or maybe you have a disordered history with food and appetite. Some people can eat intuitively and get it spot on. But that might not be you.

But... you'll have to still track

This is the only downside to reverse dieting, but it's a big one. You'll have to weigh, track, and calculate your macros to make it work. Some people won't want to (or feel able to) do that after months of dieting. Only you know whether it's worth the effort.

When to use reverse dieting

- if you've recently dieted down to less-than-normal levels of body fat
- if you want to stop dieting (because you've reached your goal, done your show, or had your shoot)
- if you like having a plan and a structure
- if you don't mind tracking your food for another chunk of time
- if you are committed to reverse dieting and can track every day

Reverse dieting is something you can do for as long as you want. There are no negative side effects to it, so long as there is a time limit. The only thing that could happen is if you keep upping your calories to the point where your digestive system slows down due to the sheer volume of food you're taking in. This can be fixed by cycling reverse dieting phases with maintenance and cutting phases.

To avoid any negatives from reverse dieting, it is recommended to take in at least 20 grams of fiber per day, especially by choosing clean, healthy foods and keeping digestion a priority by taking probiotics and consuming a greens drink every morning.

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