Weighty Decisions: The facts about calories and your weight

Now that calories are showing up on menus and people are tracking calories through their mobile apps, it may be a good time to nail down some basics about calories and weight. In many ways our bodies are like machines, we use the energy and nutrients in our food to power our activities. The amount of fuel we can get from our food is measured in what is known as calories, just like inches or meters measure distance. Calories listed on food packages and menu labels tell us how much energy is in that food. The goal is to eat only the amount of calories that our body needs to do necessary activities and defend us from illness to keep us in energy balance. When our body is given more energy or calories than it can use, it stores that extra as fat. When there is an excess of body fat, most experts agree that the solution is either to cut back on the number of calories you eat and drink or to increase the amount of calories you use by increasing physical activity. The rate of weight loss can be faster when both strategies are employed at the same time.

The science of balancing our calorie intake with physical activity is still evolving. A recent publication suggests weight loss is a complex process involving many body hormonal and neural adaptations that make predicting a precise weight loss difficult. Other factors, such as fiber or protein in foods exert an influence on calorie intake through their effect on appetite or by incomplete digestion. Specific examples include some nuts and fruit, which may result in fewer calories available than estimated in food data tables.

However, we are also different from machines because factors like how we control our behavior can influence success at weight loss and weight maintenance. Taking some easy steps to change eating behavior can help you reach your goal. Here are some basic steps to making healthy choices:

- Be Realistic: set a specific goal that is measurable and achievable within a realistic timeframe.
- Be Active: make physical activity a part of everything you do in your daily routine.
- Be Balanced: take charge of your weight by planning how much you will eat and how much physical activity you will do.
- Be Adventurous: Expand your tastes by enjoying a variety of healthful foods and physical activities.
- Be Sensible: Find the amount that is right for you. Savor your food in the amount you need and enjoy becoming stronger as you increase your physical activity.

1 Li J, Exercise patterns, ingestive behaviors and energy balance, Physiol Behav (2014) http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.physbeh.2014.04.023
2 Thomas, D, Time to correctly predict the amount of weight loss with dieting, J Acad Nutr Diet. (2014) Jun;114(6):857-61