



Strategies for Weight Loss

Ideally athletes desiring to lose weight should begin the process during the off-season in order to minimize any potential impacts to in-season training and competition. When losing weight the overall goal is to minimize the loss of lean muscle mass, thus achieving weight loss through the loss of body fat. To minimize the loss of muscle mass, weight loss should be gradual with a goal of losing 0.5-1 pound per week.

Although athletes may be tempted to skip meals to lose weight, this is not recommended as individuals often result in overeating later in the day. Instead, athletes should eat frequently throughout the day, consuming at least 3 meals and several snacks. Aim to include at least 3 food groups at meals (whole grain carbohydrate, lean protein, healthy fat) and 2 food groups at snacks.

To reduce the amount of calories eaten during the day it is important for athletes to focus on consuming foods that are nutrient dense and low in total calories. Strategies for weight loss include:

- Eating a wide variety of fresh fruits and vegetables
- Choosing low-fat or fat-free dairy products
- Selecting whole-grain foods that are high in fiber
- Limiting sugar-sweetened beverages and high-calorie drinks
- Reducing consumption of fried foods and foods high in saturated fat

The following are suggestions to help you decrease your caloric intake throughout the day:

Portion Sizes: A key concept when attempting to lose weight is to watch your portion sizes. Read food labels to determine what a standard portion is and compare this to what you commonly eat. Listen to your body and eat only until you are full. Remember, you can always eat a healthy snack again later if you get hungry.

Beverages: With meals and snacks consume water or beverages that are low-in calories. Switch to fat-free or 1% milk and sugar-free beverages such as flavored water, unsweet tea, and Crystal Light. Beverages such as soda, fruit punch, sweet tea, energy drinks, frappuccinos, and alcoholic drinks are high in calories and provide little nutritional benefit. Although fruit juices contain vitamins, they tend to be high in calories, thus athletes would be better off eating a piece of whole fruit than drinking a juice drink.

Carbohydrates: Aim to increase your intake of whole grain bread, pasta, cereals, crackers, and rice, which provide your body with fiber. A good rule of thumb is to aim to eat at least half of these items as whole grain.

Protein: Choose lean sources of meat, including: lean ground beef, baked, grilled, or roasted chicken without skin, turkey, pork, fish, broiled/boiled shrimp, tuna canned in water. Limit your intake of meats high in saturated fat, such as: dark meats, hamburgers, fried food (chicken fried steak/chicken).

- Select alternative forms of protein: Greek yogurt, low-fat cheese, cottage cheese, egg

whites or egg substitutes, hummus, and beans (black, pinto, Garbanzo).

Fats: Include healthy sources of fat in your diet, such as: avocado, nuts, peanut butter, seeds, olive oil, canola oil, and fatty fish – these all provide your body with unsaturated fat. Try to limit the amount of saturated and trans fat you consume. Fried foods, processed foods, high fat meats, ice cream, and baked goods tend to be high in saturated fats.

Vegetables: Load your plate high with non-starchy vegetables, such as: green beans, broccoli, cauliflower, carrots, celery, tomatoes, bell peppers, onions, mushrooms, summer squash, and zucchini. Top your salad with reduced calorie dressings or vinaigrettes. Be wary of entrée salads at restaurants, as these tend to be high in calories and fat due to added ingredients such as salad dressing, cheese, croutons, bacon bits, etc.

Fruits: Choose whole, fresh fruit when possible. When buying canned fruit, choose fruit canned in natural juices rather than heavy syrup. Frozen fruit also provides a good alternative for favorite fruits that are not in season. Dried fruits are high in calories, so make sure to watch your portion size when consuming these items (i.e. raisins, Craisins, pineapple).

Sauces: Watch out for sauces and spreads that are high in calories and fat, such as: mayonnaise, tartar sauce, sour cream, alfredo sauce, and salad dressing. Instead choose lower calorie options, such as: mustard, salsa, marinara sauce, vinaigrette salad dressings.

Snacks: Snacks can be a healthful part of your day. The key is to select snack foods that are nutrient dense and low in calories, such as: vegetables (baby carrots, celery, cherry tomatoes, cucumbers with hummus or low-fat dressing), fruits, low-fat yogurt, low-fat granola bars, and reduced fat cheese sticks.

Desserts: If you have a sweet tooth, adding a healthy dessert to your day is fine. Just make sure to watch portion sizes and make sure you are truly hungry before eating it. Try having fruit, sorbets, low-fat yogurt, or pudding for a lower calorie treat. It is better to allow yourself a small portion of your favorite treat than to restrict yourself and overindulge later.

Eating Out: When trying to lose weight it can be difficult to determine what to eat when dining out. Try to choose restaurants that offer healthy options that meet your needs. Many restaurants have their nutrition facts available online so you can review the menu in advance to determine what to order. Try to limit your intake of high-calorie appetizers, fried foods, greasy meats, and ask for sauces to be served on the side. Portion sizes are often large, thus plan on taking ½ of the meal home for later or share with a friend.

References:

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