



FOOD SECRETS THAT CHANGE LIVES

LESSON 4

The New Rules of Food Tracking



PART 1

Macros vs. calories vs. portions vs. intuitive eating: What's the best way to 'watch what you eat?'

Discover the right food-monitoring method for your body and goals.

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There are some things just about everyone knows.

Take this one: To lose fat, you need to watch what you eat.

No one has to hire a coach for that advice.

But knowing *how* to monitor food intake? That's something clients really need. Only it can be hard to know the best approach.

Some experts tell you to count calories or meticulously measure every macro. Others encourage you to estimate portions. Still others want you to "listen to your body."

Sometimes it seems like the entire health and fitness industry is divided.

But guess what? Calorie counting works.

Measuring macros? Also works.

Tracking hand portions? Same.

Mindful eating? Intuitive eating? Yep, those work too.

You get the picture: Every method works. (If implemented well.)

The real question: What'll work best for you (or your clients)... right now?

In this lesson, we'll help you determine the most effective way to manage food intake, based on personal preferences, lifestyle, and goals. You'll discover the answers to these common food-monitoring questions:

- ✓ Do you really need to count calories and macros? And if so, for how long?
- ✓ Is tracking hand portions anywhere near as accurate as weighing and measuring your food?

- ✓ Can strategies like mindful and intuitive eating really help you lose fat? Or are they overrated?

These answers can help you (or your clients) finally get the results you want. And along the way, gain even more: **a healthy relationship with food and the skills that make nutritious eating seem effortless.**

Most people don't realize how much they're eating.

Case in point: Research shows folks often under-estimate their food intake, sometimes by as much as 30 to 50 percent.¹

Two likely reasons:

1. They don't realize how calorically-dense many foods can be. Yes, they might know an overflowing plate is a sure way to pack on the pounds. But two slices of meat lover's pizza before bed? How bad could that be? (Try 1,000 calories.)
2. They often misjudge portions (around two-thirds of the time, in fact). Without a handy reference point, it's easy to accidentally consume a lot more calories than intended.

As a result, many people struggle to recognize how many calories their meals have and fail to eat foods in appropriately-sized portions.

(You're probably not shocked by this.)

There's a well-known fix, of course: **food tracking**. Namely:

- ✓ **Calorie counting**
- ✓ **Macro counting**
- ✓ **Hand portion tracking**

These methods act as "external guides" that can help you eat the

right amounts of food for your body at the right intervals. Do that long enough and you'll begin to retrain your body to better regulate the hormones that tell you when you're hungry and full.

You'll also be able to more easily adjust your calorie and macronutrient intake, which is key for changing your body weight and composition (or even keeping them the same).

Think of these food tracking methods as nutritional training wheels.

They give you the guidance and calibration you (or your clients) need to achieve balance on your own.

Some people need these training wheels for longer or shorter periods of time or require a combination of tracking strategies to find their balance.

But ultimately, the goal is to shed your training wheels—or external guides—and move towards knowing what, how much, and when to eat without militant tracking or monitoring.

Because let's face it: Counting calories and grams is a lot of work. And though it can be very beneficial for short periods of time, most people don't want to do it long term.

This is where “internal guides” come in. Specifically, **mindful eating** and **intuitive eating**.

These methods are *critical* for helping you tune into your body's appetite signals. They help you better sense when you're truly hungry and to stop eating once you're satisfied. This is a skill known as **self-regulation**.

Babies self-regulate naturally, stopping when they're full, no matter how much milk or formula is left in a bottle. Most adults, however, have forgotten how to tap into this ability.

Mindful and intuitive eating can help you regain this skill. These methods also enhance the results you get from food tracking. (And vice versa.)

All of which helps you more easily manage your food intake, based on a combination of:

- ✓ hunger and fullness cues
- ✓ nutritional knowledge
- ✓ understanding what works for you individually

This is where most of us want to be. But no one accomplishes this overnight. It's a skill that takes practice.

Our guide will show you (and your clients) how to get there.

Choose the right method.

Determining the most appropriate method comes down to picking the right tool for the right job.

You can do this by asking:

“What problem does food monitoring help me solve?”

Think about why you want to manage your food intake. Maybe you want to...

- ✓ Lose weight and get healthier
- ✓ Better understand your eating habits
- ✓ See how your diet affects athletic performance
- ✓ Look better
- ✓ Achieve a specific body fat percentage
- ✓ Improve your relationship with food
- ✓ Work on your eating behavior and food awareness

Depending on what you hope to accomplish, one approach may be more appropriate than another.

But it's unlikely any single method will keep working long term.

In fact, you'll get better results by combining approaches over time. Use the guide that follows to determine which method:

- ✓ makes the most sense for your current goals
- ✓ feels doable
- ✓ fits your day-to-day routine

Method #1: Calorie and macro counting

With **calorie counting**, you have a set number of calories to eat each day based on your height, weight, age, activity level, and goals.

With **macro counting**, calories are divided between three main macronutrients: protein, carbohydrates, and fat. (Alcohol is also a macronutrient and could be tracked, if desired.) Rather than counting calories specifically, you keep track of how many grams of each macronutrient you're eating. (This indirectly tracks calories too, since macronutrients make up the calories in food and drinks.)

Though calorie and macro counting are slightly different, they're similar in the sense that they're both pretty labor-intensive. With either method, you'd ideally use a food scale and/or measuring tools (cups, spoons) to weigh and measure your food at virtually every meal.

You'd also be searching a calorie database (such as MyFitnessPal or Cronometer) to find and log the nutritional value of what you're eating. Or you might use nutrition labels to manually calculate your intake.

Why use calorie and macro counting?

Research shows it works. Tracking calories and macronutrients—even without any other dietary counseling—helps people lose up to five percent of their body weight, finds research.² For someone who weighs

200 pounds, that's a 10-pound weight loss.

It provides maximal precision. Calorie and macro tracking aren't 100 percent accurate, but they're the most precise methods available outside of a lab. Important note: If you decide to estimate serving sizes—instead of weighing and measuring your food—this method becomes less accurate.

You learn calorie counts. By tracking macros or calories, you become more aware of how many calories are in everything you eat and drink. Like that a typical 8-ounce margarita has 450 calories or that your favorite restaurant salad packs more calories than two Big Macs.

Calorie and macro counting work well for...

Short-term use. Tracking your calories or macros for a couple of weeks can help you learn more about your current eating habits. It also gives you a better understanding of appropriate portions. Once you have the hang of it, you can transition to hand portions and, eventually, self-regulation.

People with advanced needs. More precision is needed for more precise goals. For example, let's say someone needs to weigh exactly 125 pounds to make their weight class, or be exactly 8% body fat for their profession. Tracking calories and/or macros is generally the most effective way to get there.

Numbers-oriented folks. Some people truly enjoy the process of collecting calorie and macronutrient data, and then monitoring changes in weight, body size, and health markers such as blood pressure and cholesterol. They're also usually emotionally detached from the numbers—seeing them as information rather than assigning them “good” or “bad” values. For these people, tracking calories or macros can feel empowering.

Calorie and macro counting are less ideal for...

Most people. In our experience coaching over 100,000 clients, the average person just won't stick to it for long. That goes for everyone from elite athletes to 60-year old grandparents. They don't want to bother with calorie math or meticulously tracking everything they eat.

And research shows that even people who like this method tend to stop using it over time.^{3,4} One likely reason: It can take the joy out of eating. For example, you might be so worried about hitting your macros you struggle to find pleasure in the social aspects of eating. (Like sharing a good meal with family and friends.)

What's more, for some people, this type of food tracking may actually be unhealthy. Preliminary evidence suggests associations between calorie and macro tracking apps and three types of disordered eating.⁵⁻⁷

- ✓ **Binge eating:** the overwhelming urge to consume as much food as possible, as fast as possible
- ✓ **Cognitive dietary restraint:** feeling like you're constantly making an effort to limit what you eat
- ✓ **Moralizing food:** labeling what you eat as "good" and "bad" and attaching your self-worth to your food choices

Those at highest risk: People who tend to be overly self-critical, are prone to disordered eating, or have had an eating disorder in the past.

This isn't just a research finding; it corresponds to what many coaches, dietitians, and counselors observe in their practices. (Which is the reason it was studied in the first place.)

That's why we usually recommend you count calories and macros for only short periods of time. Or to people who need to achieve very specific body composition goals for their profession.

Remember: A tool is only as good as the job it does. So, if:

- ✓ **macro counting truly works for you;**
- ✓ **you genuinely enjoy it;**
- ✓ **you find it empowering and interesting; and**
- ✓ **you're meeting your goals with it easily and productively...**

...then, by all means, keep doing it.

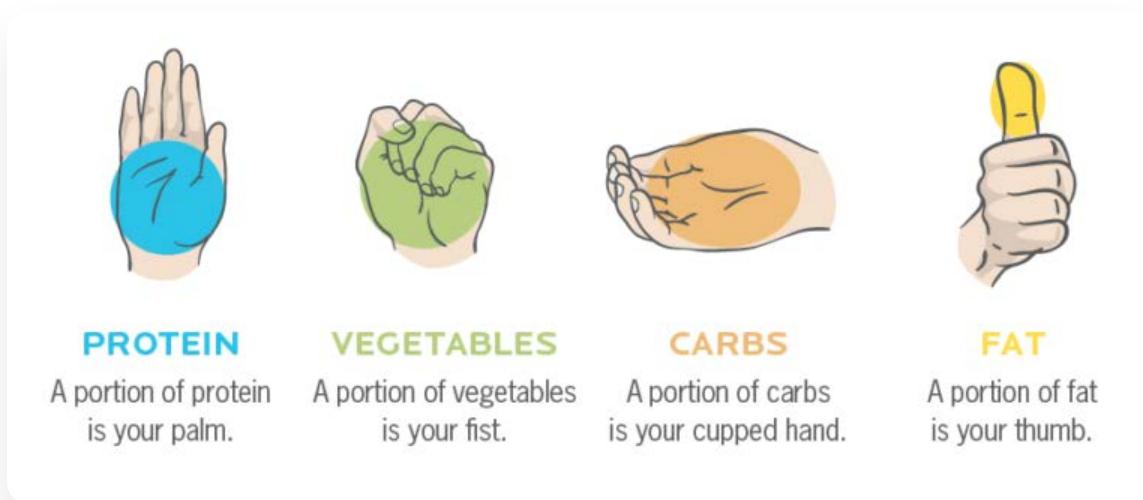
If, on the other hand:

- ✓ macro counting **makes you feel confused, anxious, distracted, distressed,** or any other negative emotion;
- ✓ **you find it onerous,** time-consuming, and effortful;
- ✓ you're putting a lot of attention towards it, **creating an imbalanced life;**
- ✓ you're spending **more time on it than actually doing the things that help** you reach your goal...

... then consider other options and tactics (like the ones that follow).

Method #2: Hand portions

In this system—developed by Precision Nutrition—you use your hand as a personalized, portable portioning tool. You're not actually measuring your food, but rather using your hand to gauge portion size. And because each hand portion correlates to a certain number of protein, carbs, or fat, this method counts calories and macros for you.



- ✓ Your **palm** determines your **protein** portions.
- ✓ Your **fist** determines your **vegetable** portions.
- ✓ Your **cupped hand** determines your **carb** portions.
- ✓ Your **thumb** determines your **fat** portions.

The way it works is simple: Just enter your sex, body weight, goals, activity level, and eating preferences into the [Precision Nutrition Calculator](#). The calculator then reveals the recommended calories and macros for reaching your goal.

Then it converts those numbers to the equivalent hand portions. So all you have to do is use your hands to get the recommended number of

daily portions. (The calculator also gives you a free personalized report and eating guide to help you or your client get started.)

Why use hand portion tracking?

It's convenient and easy to understand. Your hands are with you everywhere you go. They're proportional to your body and always the same size. So they serve as a reliable reference point—without the need for measuring cups or a food scale.

Customization is simple. If you're not seeing the results you want, all you have to do is adjust the number of portions you're eating. For instance, you could remove one cupped hand of carbs and one thumb of fats from your daily intake, and see what happens.

It's also easy to make adjustments based on your preferences. You can swap a handful of carbs for an extra thumb-sized serving of fats, or vice versa.

Plus, you can use this approach to follow any preferred eating style, whether it's Paleo, keto, Mediterranean, or plant-based.

It's precise enough. For most people—even those seeking body transformation—it's not necessary to measure or weigh food.

Our internal research shows hand portions are 95 percent as accurate as carefully weighing, measuring, and tracking, but with substantially less effort and time involved.

And since calorie databases—the tool most people use to track calories and macros—can be off by as much as 20 percent, the five percent difference here is negligible for most.⁸

Make no mistake: Hand portions *aren't* as accurate as macro tracking. But they are accurate enough to help you consistently track your food intake, and reach your goals. And that's what really matters.

Hand portion tracking works well for...

People with busy, messy, complex lives. So basically everyone. Compared to scales and tracking apps, hand portions make it far easier to consistently gauge how much you're eating.

Most body composition goals. Unless you're chasing extreme results against a non-negotiable deadline—for instance, you get paid for how your body looks or performs—hand portions can get you where you want to go.

Hand portions are less ideal for...

People with the most aggressive goals. Professional physique athletes and models may need a more precise strategy. It's the same with athletes who need to cut weight or reach a specific body fat percentage—such as in preparation for a UFC fight. Keep in mind: These people are essentially being paid to eat this way. It's part of their job. And that comes with tradeoffs.

Method #3: Mindful and intuitive eating

Mindful eating means paying attention to the experience, feelings, and sensations you have around eating. Practices like eating slowly and eating until 80 percent full are a part of mindful eating. Instead of focusing on eating certain types or amounts of food, mindful eating teaches you how to regulate your food intake by noticing how your body and mind feel when you eat.

Intuitive eating is a similar system, but it rejects “diet” messaging and culture. Intuitive eating wasn't originally intended to achieve a specific body composition goal, but rather to improve your overall relationship with food.

Both approaches involve learning how to tell whether you're hungry or not, know when you've had enough, and be at ease with food.

Why use mindful and intuitive eating?

These approaches foster a healthy relationship with food. By practicing mindful and intuitive eating, you can improve your ability to self-regulate. Over time, you'll remove the training wheels of external guides—calorie counting, macro counting, and tracking hand portions—and enjoy more flexibility and freedom, while staying on track.

Mastering these self-regulatory skills has also been shown to strengthen self-efficacy—the belief you can reach your goals.⁹ This can work wonders for your confidence, motivation, and self-assuredness in pursuing your health goals. (It's pretty valuable for everyday life, too.)

The principles can be applied anytime, anywhere. No matter what food options are available, you can always eat slowly and mindfully. Understanding what it feels like to be hungry, satiated, full, and/or overstuffed is a lifelong skill. These methods give you practice.

You learn that hunger isn't an emergency. As we covered in lesson 3, When you feel hungry, it's common to panic and want to eat whatever you see. But when you start paying attention to your hunger cues, you learn that you're absolutely going to feel hungry sometimes. And you discover that's okay.

Nothing bad will happen if you don't eat immediately. You might even find the feeling passes. Or that you actually aren't all that hungry. It could be you were craving food to help you cope with pain, shame, guilt, or stress.

You might also realize you are, in fact, *really* hungry. But by understanding that hunger isn't an emergency, you'll have the time and space to make more thoughtful food choices.

Our clients consistently report this is one of the most powerful things they learn in our coaching program.

Mindful and intuitive eating work well for...

Anyone whose main goal is to improve their relationship with food.

These are folks who don't have weight or body composition-related goals (at least not right now). Instead, they just want to feel more at peace with their food choices.

People using other food monitoring methods. (Or are ready to transition away from them.) Mindful and intuitive eating by *themselves* have a mixed track record for weight loss results.¹⁰⁻¹³ But since they help people build fundamental eating skills they can use forever, we highly recommend them.

When mindful or intuitive eating are combined with a method such as tracking hand portions, calories, or macros, it's the best of both worlds: You get external guidelines to help you become more aware and make better choices. And you learn to better self-regulate your intake by paying attention to how food makes you feel.

What to do next...

Step 1: Start where you are

Determine the approach that best matches your (or your client's) lifestyle, goals, and preferences. For most people, this means a combination of methods.

Use the nutritional training wheel approach—calorie counting, macro counting, hand portion tracking—to learn how to:

- ✓ Better gauge portion sizes
- ✓ Build quality meals
- ✓ Optimize your progress

To track your food intake, you'll need to determine your starting point.

You can do this by entering your details into the [Precision Nutrition Calculator](#). This will provide the calories, macros, and hand portions to eat to achieve your desired goal—whether you want to lose weight, gain weight, or simply eat for better health.

Then use the targets that correspond to your chosen tracking method. This is your baseline. Follow this approach as consistently as possible for two weeks.

Ideally, combine your food tracking efforts with intuitive/mindful strategies: paying attention to your internal cues, eating slowly, and stopping when you're 80 percent full. (We recommend that, remember?)

Step 2: Monitor and adjust

When it comes to tracking your food, accuracy is an illusion.

All tracking options—even the most careful calorie counting—are inaccurate to some degree.

Fortunately, when it comes to food tracking, pinpoint accuracy isn't what really drives results.

Consistency is what's most important.

Here's why: When you track what you eat, regardless of which one you choose, you're getting a consistent measurement of your food intake. So even though the calorie counts aren't 100 percent accurate, you've still established a solid and repeatable baseline.

Then you monitor your progress:

Are you (or your client) losing weight, gaining weight, or maintaining?

From here, you simply use your preferred tracking method to adjust your food intake, if needed, to achieve your desired outcome.

This process happens no matter how accurate your food tracking method. Because guess what?

There's no way to precisely predict how many calories your body needs each day. Even the best calculators only provide an estimate to start from.

Think of it as an experiment. If you don't get the results you want, make small tweaks until you see progress.

Let's say you want to lose weight and our calculator advises you eat:

- ✓ **2,500 calories per day** (if you're counting calories)
- ✓ **200 grams of protein, 200 grams of carbs, and 100 grams of fat per day** (if you're counting macros)
- ✓ **7 palms of protein, 6 fists of vegetables, 6 handfuls of carbs, and 7 thumbs of fats per day** (if you're tracking hand portions)

But after two weeks, the scale hasn't budged.

Your next move? You could reduce your intake by:

- ✓ **250 calories per day** (if you're counting calories)
- ✓ **30 grams of carbs and 15 grams of fat** (if you're counting macros)
- ✓ **1 handful of carbs and 2 thumbs of fat** (if you're tracking hand portions)

(Or, if you're trying to gain weight instead, you could increase your intake by those amounts.)

Monitor for another two to four weeks, and if needed, adjust again using the same process.

Now you're making modifications using feedback from your progress, not on your initial calculations. **This is how you optimize your food intake for your individual needs.**

Step 3: Find your sweet spot

As you reach your goals, you can fully transition to self-regulation.

This doesn't mean you have to forget about calories or macros or hand portions. In fact, you'll continue to use the skills you've built to get to this point.

For example, you now:

- ✓ Have a better sense of how many calories and macros you're eating
- ✓ Understand appropriate portion sizes
- ✓ Have an increased awareness of food quality

You may still reference your palm when determining how much protein to put on your plate, but you won't need to track it. In essence, you've now internalized these external guides.

So you're now using what you know to mindfully build out meals (without moralizing food). But you're only doing so when you're physically hungry. (Unless you're making a conscious choice to eat something when not hungry.) And then you're eating these meals slowly, until satisfied.

But also know this: Whenever you want to make significant body changes, you may find it helpful—even necessary—to use external guides again. The methods are there for you, if the need arises.

And remember: Think beyond the food

Food is important, but it's not the only thing that matters. That's true even if weight loss is your goal. A well-rounded program will focus on not just nutrition, but also on:

- ✓ getting more quality sleep
- ✓ moving regularly
- ✓ stress management
- ✓ improving your outlook and mindset

So that you (or your clients) are thriving in all domains of health.

Because ultimately, isn't that the kind of deep health you're after?

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