

Session 8

The Cheat Meal

This is the preferred method for eating never-have foods without blowing your nutrition plan. Now, my general rule on cheating is this: make sure that no more than 10% of your meals are missed or cheat meals. So if you're eating six meals a day, seven days a week (for a total of 42 meals per week), then no more than four of those meals should be misses or cheats. If you can achieve 90% adherence — and anyone can, it doesn't require extreme discipline — you can get the results you want.

The catch, however, is that the 10% rule allows you to eat *unplanned* cheat meals. You know how that goes: "Well, that pizza does look good, but I should stick to the plan and eat the chicken salad . . . oh what the hell, gimme the pizza! I'll just consider it a cheat meal."

Now, this isn't necessarily a problem. If you have the discipline to keep your cheat meals to under about three to four per week, you can have them whenever you want. The problem arises when you allow a spontaneous, unplanned cheat meal to set off a chain of events (first pizza, then dessert, then fast food, etc.) that ends up in a nutritional derailment. Unfortunately, this happens more often than people care to admit, particularly in the early stages of a new plan.

It's better to *plan* your cheat meals. And even better would be to plan them around a social event (like a weekly get-together with the crew, a weekly restaurant night with your significant other, etc.).

Benefits

The psychological advantage of planning cheat meals is significant for they help to emotionally calm your cravings. By looking forward to splurging on your favorite foods, you will have an easier time sticking with your nutrition plan the rest of the time.

Strategically planning cheat meals can also kick start your metabolism and provide you with extra energy. Because your body will adapt to each stressor you throw at it, for example a reduction in calories, your body will eventually become quite efficient and will burn less calories. When you shock your system by eating foods that are higher in calories, or are not normally in our food plan, you will increase our metabolism since your body is forced to work harder at burning the extra calories ingested. The next day, when you return to your supportive nutrition plan, your body will burn calories at a faster rate now that your metabolism is working harder.

When and How?

Many people choose to have a cheat day every Sunday. I personally work better on planning to cheat a few meals or snacks each week. Devoting an entire day (Sunday) to cheating doesn't work for me emotionally. Through trial and error, I know my body and mind works best when I allow myself to have a cheat meal when I truly need one. This may mean a Starbucks Frappuccino, a small bowl of macaroni and cheese, or a few ginger snap cookies.

I'll add, though, that turning a cheat meal into an entire "cheat weekend," as is sometimes advocated, will almost certainly slow your progress during your results attaining phase. Unless there are other issues, I'd keep it to a half-day or less, so as to stay within the 10% zone. This is pretty close to an optimal balance between progress and psychological willingness to keep eating well.

Cheat Meal Tips

Incorporate the following tips to get the most benefit out of your cheat meals:

1. Set a cheat day once a week, or eat clean all week and let yourself relax a little when dining out.
2. Lighten up. One splurge will not ruin your progress. In fact a supportive nutrition plan can include all food in moderation.
3. Get moving. Do an extra 10 minutes of cardio tomorrow morning or add a couple extra sets to your weight training routine.
4. Think long term. You will be eating for many years to come, so follow your supportive eating plan and get back on track, even though you may be tempted to skip dinner to make up for your indulgence.
5. Learn from your experience. Why did you cheat? Did you not have your food prepared? Were you bored? Over hungry? Depressed or Anxious? Find out what made those sweets so tempting and be armed and ready for next time!

The key is to cheat only when necessary. Be patient and persistent. This skill can take time to learn but is extremely rewarding.

DISCLAIMER: The physical advantage of the cheat meal is only experienced by those individuals who have made noticeable progress towards their fitness goals. (This will not work if you are not able to follow the 90/10 rule with some type of consistency. The extra calories will only end up adding to your weight).