

The Macros Diet (Flexible Dieting)

What We Know

- › The IIFYM diet allows individuals to eat any food they choose, as long as it fits within their macronutrient goals. The macros diet, also referred to as If It Fits Your Macros (IIFYM) and flexible dieting, entails tracking the macronutrients in the diet to achieve a desired body composition. The IIFYM was originally developed by a group of competitive bodybuilders who grew tired of adhering to strict diets, often involving eliminating foods and restricting calories, to prepare for bodybuilding competitions. Specifically, the macros diet entails tracking carbohydrate, protein, and fat^(2,5)
- Following the macros diet first entails determining one's total daily energy expenditure, with the goal of consuming about 15-20% fewer calories than that number to achieve weight loss. Next, the macronutrient (i.e., carbohydrate, protein, fat) ratio that is desired needs to be determined. The final step is tracking one's daily intake to meet one's target "macros" and total daily energy levels. The diet requires that individuals consume about 2 times the RDA for protein of 0.8 g/kg of body weight, so it is considered higher in protein than the typical diet. As opposed to focusing on calories or types of food, individuals are encouraged to focus on monitoring their intake to achieve their desired levels of carbohydrate, protein, and fat. The ratio of macronutrients in the macros diet may vary but usually is about 40% carbohydrate, 40% protein, and 20% fat. Individuals may also count fiber in the diet to help them reach desired daily reference intakes for fiber and micronutrients^(2,3,5)
- The premise of the diet is that the body does not distinguish where the macronutrients come from in the diet, rather the diet is focused on the total macronutrients in the diet. For example, carbohydrates in a cookie are not different from carbohydrates in a piece of fruit in the IIFYM diet; both foods can be acceptable if they fit within the macronutrient goals of the diet. The diet is promoted as beneficial because individuals can monitor their calories and track macronutrients^(2,5)
- › Research has indicated that the macronutrient composition of the diet is not a primary determinant of weight loss, however^(1,4)
- Using data from a subset of participants in the Preventing Overweight Using Novel Dietary Strategies (POUNDS LOST) study, researchers investigated whether the macronutrient composition of a low-calorie diet affected reduction in total body fat, visceral abdominal fat, hepatic fat, or the preservation of lean mass. The body fat, lean mass, abdominal fat, and hepatic fat of participants following one of four diets with varying macronutrient amounts were measured at 6 months and 2 years. Results indicated that participants lost a greater amount of fat than lean mass on all of the diets, with no differences in body composition, abdominal fat, or hepatic fat⁽⁴⁾
- In a review article examining the effect of macronutrient composition on short-term food intake and of the macronutrient composition of different diets on weight loss, researchers found that all macronutrients play a role in releasing satiety-related hormones and that a variety of diet approaches could help individuals lose weight. Because of the minimal differences in the amount of weight loss seen in individuals consuming different proportions of macronutrients in the diet, the researchers suggested that individuals should focus on finding a diet regimen that they can follow long term⁽¹⁾

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› Protein in the diet plays an important role in weight loss and maintenance of weight loss ^(6,7,8)

- Diets higher in protein—containing 1.2–1.6 g/kg protein/kg/d and including approximately 25-30 g of protein per meal—lead to improvements in appetite, body weight management, and cardiometabolic risk factors when compared to diets lower in protein in the short-term; i.e., less than a year. Long-term data are not as consistent, although the effects of increased protein intake are apparent with regard to weight maintenance and/or prevention of weight gain⁽⁶⁾
- Athletes seeking to lose body fat rather than lean tissue should combine consumption of between 1.8 and 2.7 g/kg/d of protein with a moderate energy deficit of about 500 calories with resistance training. The specific amount of protein needed in this range is dependent on body composition, training regimen, typical protein intake, personal tolerance level, and overall nutrition goals. Reducing fat and carbohydrate intake should allow individuals to attain higher protein intake without excessively restricting any individual macronutrient. Protein intake should be focused on high-quality protein spaced throughout the day ⁽⁷⁾
- In a study examining the effects of dietary protein content on weight loss, weight maintenance, and body composition during 6 months of calorie-restricted regimens, researchers found that a normal protein intake of at least 0.8 g/kg/body weight was found to be sufficient for weight loss and weight maintenance. However, an increased protein intake of 1.2 g/kg/body weight was needed to help preserve resting energy expenditure and fat-free mass. The researchers concluded that insufficient protein in the diet contributes to the potential for weight regain⁽⁸⁾

What We Can Do

- › Learn about the macros diet or flexible dieting so you can accurately assess your patients' personal characteristics and health education needs; share this information with your colleagues
- Educate clients on the concepts of macronutrients (carbohydrate, protein, and fat) and micronutrients (vitamins and minerals) and the role they play in health, weight loss, and weight maintenance
- Emphasize that counting/tracking macronutrients is a tool that may be useful in helping to fine-tune the diet, but may not be as useful in improving the overall quality of the diet
- Emphasize to clients the importance of consuming nutrient-dense foods rather than foods that provide little to no nutritional value

Related Guidelines

Some tools designed to help individuals track the macronutrient content of their diets include: My Macros +, MyFitnessPal, Fitocracy Macros, Nutritionists, and Lose it

References

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