

How Many Calories Should I Eat to Gain Muscle?

If your goal is to build bigger muscles, you need to arm yourself with two things: a hypertrophy-focused training program and a caloric-surplus diet.

Lifting weights and crushing workouts: these are the glamorous and sexy parts of getting bigger. It's the discipline to follow a muscle-building diet that turns people off. But it's the most important part of gaining muscle. In fact, some fitness experts believe that proper nutrition makes up 70% of the results you see in the mirror.

Maybe you have your training program down to a T but you're asking yourself, "How many calories should I eat to gain muscle?" If you're not sure how to eat to promote muscle growth, don't worry.

In this guide, we're going to breakdown the three most important muscle building factors. We'll review how many calories for muscle gain, the best macronutrient split, and the foods most associated with muscle growth.

What Are the Main Muscle Building Factors?

First things first, before we answer the question, "How many calories do I need to gain muscle?", we want to talk about the key to optimal muscle building. There are three central bricks that make up the foundation of muscle growth: training, recovery, and feeding.

Training

Put simply, this is your workout routine. The ideal training program for muscle will be based on a macro, meso, and micro scale, detailing your entire journey for one year.

- Micro Calendar: Shows your week-to-week workouts
- Meso Calendar: Month-to-month workouts
- Macro Calendar: Training for an entire year

It's important to remember that these calendars are NOT static. It's guaranteed that they will change so be flexible and update as you progress.

Recovery

You must be as dedicated to rest as you are to your training. Hit your ideal caloric intake every day, sleep no less than eight hours, and get in that post-workout protein shake after every workout.

Feeding

You can train all day, every day, but if you aren't supporting your body with proper nutrition and feeding your muscles, you can lose muscle mass, get hurt, or both. Let's talk more about what you can do to optimize proper muscle-building nutrition. How many calories to build muscle will vary from individual to individual (we'll break that down for you below)

Importance of Diet for Muscle Building

If you want to build lean muscle mass, you need to know EXACTLY how many calories you need to eat. There's no way around it. Because if you don't eat enough calories, you will stifle muscle growth. What's more, most of your efforts in the gym will be wasted.

Let's say you want to know how many calories to bulk, and you're eating everything in sight. But what happens if you eat *too* many calories?

Yes, you will gain muscle, but you will also gain a lot of body fat, which will be a pain to lose after you're done bulking. That's why you need to hit the sweet spot between *not eating enough calories* and *eating too many calories*.

How Many Calories Should I Eat to Gain Muscle?

How do you find that sweet spot? By using these four easy-to-follow steps:

Step 1: Calculate your Basal Metabolic Rate

First, you need to know your basal metabolic rate (BMR). Your BMR is how many calories your body needs to fuel ONLY its most vital processes:

- Breathing
- Circulation
- Nutrient processing
- Cell production

Eating less calories than this number would put your body into starvation mode. An [online calorie calculator](#) is the fastest way to determine your BMR, and you'll only need the following information:

- Your age
- Your gender
- Your bodyweight

- Your height

Step 2: Calculate Your Total Daily Energy Expenditure

Now, you need to calculate your total daily energy expenditure. Your TDEE is how many calories you burn a day in total. So, if you were to eat this number in calories?

Your weight would remain precisely the same.

You can calculate it by taking your BMR and adding the calories you burn from physical activity. Use this online [calorie calculator](#) to find out your TDEE.

Step 3: Add 250 to 500 calories to your TDEE

Your TDEE tells you how many calories you need to eat to maintain your current weight, but to gain lean muscle mass, you need enough fuel for your muscle-building workouts.

Eating 250 to 500 calories more than your TDEE is the perfect amount to build lean-muscle: This is your sweet spot number.

We recommend starting with 250 extra calories and increasing gradually based on the intensity of your workouts. Don't go over 500 extra calories.

Step 4: Measure your Progress, Make Adjustments

It's important to recognize that no calculator is perfect. Yes, a calculator can give you a reasonable estimation of your TDEE. But you might find that, by using your sweet spot number, you're either gaining weight too fast or that you're not gaining enough weight. Therefore, you are not optimizing your muscle gains.

There's a rule of thumb to prevent this from happening: You should aim to gain a maximum of one pound a week. So, if you're not hitting that number? Make changes to your diet to ensure you do.

How to Split Macronutrients for the Best Results

Eating the right amount of calories is not the whole story. You also need to know how to divide these calories between the three macronutrients: carbohydrates, proteins, and fats. Hitting the right numbers will help you maximize your muscle gains.

What Percentage of Calories Should Come from Proteins?

Proteins are the building blocks of muscle so eating enough high-quality protein is the most important part of building lean muscle. One meta-analysis of over 49 trials with 1,863 people has shown you need to eat 0.7 grams of protein per pound (or 1.6 gram per kg) to optimize muscle gains. [\[1\]](#)

But here's something you must take into consideration: The types of protein you eat.

Proteins are made out of 22 different types of amino acids. Thirteen of these amino acids are produced by your own body. These are the nonessential amino acids. But you can *only* get the other nine amino acids through your food choices. These are the essential amino acids.

Based on this knowledge, you can categorize protein sources as either "complete" or "incomplete." A complete protein source contains all nine essential amino acids. Examples of complete protein sources are red meat, poultry, fish, eggs, milk, and yogurt.

Incomplete protein sources do not contain all the essential amino acids. Examples are mostly plant-based foods like rice, beans, and grains. That's why vegetarians have to get their proteins from a wider variety of sources than non-vegetarians.

The Verdict: Aim to eat about 30% to 40% of your calories from mostly complete protein sources.

What Percentage of Calories Should Come from Fats?

Eating enough fats is crucial to maintain your testosterone levels, which helps you build muscle and burn fat effectively. But it's important to choose the right kinds of fats. Here are the differences between the four types of fat:

Saturated Fats

Saturated fats are found mostly in meat, dairy products, and oils. In the past, it was believed that a diet high in saturated fats had a lot of adverse health effects.

But this has since been disproven, especially when the source of the saturated fat comes from plant-based sources such as coconut oil. Still, if you have a certain health condition, like familial hypercholesterolemia, you may want to avoid eating too many saturated fats.

Monounsaturated Fats

Monounsaturated fats primarily contain heart-healthy omega-3 fatty acids and they are found in foods like avocados, nuts, fish, and olive oil. They're considered healthy fats because they protect your heart, support insulin sensitivity, and promote the fat burning process.

Omega-3 fatty acids also reduce inflammation and keep your hormone levels and cell membranes healthy. Most of the fats you're eating should be monounsaturated fats.

Polyunsaturated Fats

Polyunsaturated fats contain omega-6 fatty acids, and you'll find them in nuts, corn, soybeans, and meat. In moderation, omega-6 fatty acids support healthy brain functioning, but eating too many omega-6 fats causes inflammation, which can trigger a number of adverse health effects.

Trans Fats

This is the worst type of fats for your health. They're found in fast-foods, microwavable foods, and other prepackaged foods. Always make sure you check the label to find out if a food contains trans fats and if it does, avoid it.

The Verdict: Aim to eat about 20% of your calories from fats.

What Percentage of Calories Should Come from Carbohydrates?

Your body breaks down carbohydrates into glucose, which is used as energy. Not all carbohydrates are created equal. You can make a separation between three different types of carbs:

Fiber-Rich Carbs

Fiber-rich carbs or complex carbs are the healthiest kinds of carbs. They're the richest in nutrients and take the longest time to digest. This comes with a couple of benefits: It helps to give you a constant supply of energy throughout the day, and it keeps your insulin level under control.

But it also prevents you from craving foods that are bad for you. You should aim to get most of your carbs from fiber-rich foods. And it's okay to eat them throughout the entire day.

Starchy Carbs

Starchy carbs also contain a lot of essential nutrients like calcium, iron and B-vitamins. They're digested faster than fiber-rich carbs and can be used for fast energy. That's also why they have a stronger response on your insulin level. Starchy carbs are perfect for eating after your workouts.

Refined / Sugary Carbs

Refined or sugary carbs are usually the foods we crave the most but they're also the unhealthiest. Why? Because they're the lowest in micronutrient content. And your body processes them the fastest.

This has a negative effect on your insulin level and it leaves you feeling hungry no matter how many of them you eat. Examples include soda, cereal, cookies, and white bread.

The Verdict: Aim to eat about 30 to 40% of your calories from carbohydrates. Make sure they mostly come from fiber-rich carbs. Eat a starchy carb meal after your workouts. Avoid eating refined sugary carbs as much as possible.

What Food Should You Eat?

The following foods can help you hit your caloric intake and build the most lean muscle mass:

Proteins:

- Eggs
- Chicken breast
- Pork chops
- Tuna
- Greek yogurt
- Cottage cheese
- Whey protein

Fats:

- Fatty fish (e.g., salmon, tuna, mackerel)
- Nuts (e.g., almonds)
- Seeds (e.g., pumpkin seeds)
- Oil (e.g., coconut oil)
- Supplements (e.g., MCT oil)

Carbohydrates (Fiber):

- Low-sugar fruits (e.g., berries)
- Beans
- Vegetables
- Legumes

Carbohydrates (Starch):

- Bread
- Pasta
- White rice
- Oats

When to Eat to Get the Best Results

The difference between the three types of carbs brings up the topic of meal timing. Here's the thing: WHEN you eat these macronutrients also matters. Why? Because your body processes specific foods better during particular moments in the day.

For you to understand, you need to know how working out affects your body. You see, your muscles use a large part of its glycogen stores to fuel your workout. Some of the proteins in your muscles also get broken down.

What happens next? Your body *desperately* wants to refill its glycogen stores. And rebuild all of the broken-down proteins. That's why it starts using nutrients to rebuild muscle way more effectively than it usually would.

But here's the kicker: Studies show that your body is only in this mode within the first 30 to 45 minutes AFTER your workout. This timeframe is called "the anabolic window of opportunity."

Since the window of opportunity is so short, you need to eat carbs that can supply energy: Starchy carbs are perfect for this. So, always have a post-workout (PW) meal with starchy carbs and quality proteins. ^[2]

Everything else comes down to eating five to eight meals with the right balance of proteins, fats, and carbs spread throughout the day.

Measure Your Muscle Gains

Measuring your progress will help you tweak your workouts to maximize your muscle gains. Here are the best ways to do just that:

Progress Pictures: Take a picture of yourself on Day One, then continue to take progress pictures once or twice a month.

Overall Weight: You should weigh yourself daily, first thing in the morning after you use the bathroom. At the end of the week, tally the average.

Body Fat vs. Muscle: You can use a scale to keep track of your weight but, unfortunately, a scale doesn't tell you how much of that weight is actual muscle. That's why you also need to keep track of your body fat percentage. It's best to measure your body fat percentage once every month. And it's important to continue using the same test. Why? A different body fat percentage test can give you a completely different number. The most common and cost-effective method to measure bodyfat is a bioelectrical impedance test.

Know Your Calories to Build Muscle

Knowing exactly how many calories you need to eat is crucial to build lean muscle effectively. You can calculate your daily caloric intake by adding 250 to 500 calories to your Total Daily Energy Expenditure (TDEE). However, it's easy to slightly miscalculate your TDEE. To make sure you're hitting the right number, keep close track of your progress: Weigh yourself and measure your body fat percentage regularly.

Also, make sure you're getting these calories from quality food sources: You should get 30% to 40% of your calories from protein sources; 30% to 40% from (mostly fiber-rich) carbs sources; and around 20% from healthy fat sources. Lastly, meal timing also matters: Eating a protein and carb-heavy meal post-workout will help you maximize muscle gain.

References

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