Many Soldiers struggle with maintaining Army weight standards. Understanding the nutritional value of food and a balanced diet is key to mastering the mechanics of weight loss and applying them to a healthy lifestyle. (Graphic by NCO Journal)

Is It a Lack of Self-Discipline or Knowledge? A Proper Approach to Weight Loss

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With so much information available today, why do so many Soldiers struggle with meeting and maintaining the Army's weight standards? Is it a lack of self-discipline or lack of knowledge regarding the nutritional aspects of a well-balanced diet? This article analyzes these two questions in an attempt to highlight various merits and criticisms of weight control issues affecting the Army and to provide a different perspective on this issue.

It could be said that self-discipline might be a small contributor to the problem, the primary reason stems from a lack of understanding of how to adopt a proper nutritional lifestyle.

Dieting: Separating Facts from Fads

Many military personnel and civilians alike generally do not understand the mechanics of losing weight. Their first plan of attack is to go on a crash diet. Research shows most Soldiers who struggle with weight problems try numerous fad diets in an attempt to meet their height and weight standard.[1]

Although well-intentioned, this strategy is unsound. For instance, when faced with the need to lose weight and pass the Army Physical Fitness Test or attend a military school, Soldiers drastically change their eating and exercise habits with foods they do not typically consume. In addition to modifying their diet, most dieters double

down on aerobic exercises in an attempt to expedite their weight loss. Not only are these actions unhealthy, they are also unsustainable for an extended period.

Research shows that weight cycling or "yo-yo dieting" causes havoc to the human body's metabolic system. The bulk of the weight loss is water and lean muscle mass.[2] After dieting for a month or two, most people return to their regular eating habits and gain back almost all of the weight in fat and lean muscle mass.[3]

Most of us have heard that one needs to reduce the number of consumed calories to lose weight. Although this axiom is true, many Soldiers fail to achieve their goals because they do not know their required caloric intake. When they need to lose weight, they immediately respond by eating less and consuming the so-called "healthy food choices" mentioned earlier.

There are many problems with this approach. First, some of these "healthy foods" are not healthy at all and most are very high in calories. For instance, a Zensation Asian Salad from Zaxby's has over 1,100 calories.[4] This equates to almost three Double Cheeseburgers from McDonald's.[5] Additionally, not knowing the number of calories required to lose weight contributes to a false sense of security, causing Soldiers to overeat and jeopardize their weight loss efforts.

What You Use Dictates What You Lose

What can a Soldier do to succeed in meeting his or her weight goals? The most important factor is knowing his or her Total Daily Energy Expenditure.[6] In simple terms, the TDEE is the number of calories a person needs to maintain his or her current weight.

It is important to note that to lose one pound of fat a person must burn 3,500 calories.[7] Consequently, a proper approach to losing weight is cutting between 250 and 500 calories from the daily intake. By removing 500 calories each day, a person will lose a pound of fat per week. One pound a week amounts to 52 pounds at the end of one year, which is a success story. Moreover, this type of weight loss is painless and easy to maintain. Think of it as not eating that bagel in the morning or the traditional dessert at night. Of course, more aggressive measures also contribute to accelerating weight loss. Adding aerobic/cardio exercises increases the number of calories the body burns.

Along with the TDEE or daily caloric allowance, knowing how many calories a day one consumes is also essential. Tracking calorie intake ensures food consumption is below the TDEE. One does not need to be a nutritionist to track calories. There are hundreds of websites and applications to facilitate this process. Apps used with mobile phones or fitness trackers make calorie tracking a breeze and a fun thing to do.

The information mentioned above can help achieve success, but understanding other essential aspects of nutrition makes weight loss a more effective and efficient endeavor. For instance, grasping the nutritional value of food is of utmost importance, especially since there are different types of calories. For example, the 420 calories in a Cookies and Kreme doughnut from Krispy Kreme[8] are not necessarily the same 420 calories in a baked piece of chicken. How is this possible? The answer lies in the types of macronutrients.

Every food is composed of three types of macronutrients: carbohydrates, protein, and fats.[9] Understanding the function these macronutrients or "macros" have in the human body allows one to choose the right combination and quantities of foods, thereby resulting in weight loss.

Macronutrients provide the body with energy and material needed to grow and to function correctly. Carbohydrates are the primary source of energy the body uses to operate, while proteins provide the body with substances it needs to build and repair muscle tissue. Fat helps the body in several ways, such as providing insulation for maintaining body temperature and protecting body organs. It also aids in the digestion of vitamins and micronutrients.[10]

Understanding the role of macronutrients allows one to choose the right combination and quantity of food to consume. Carbohydrates, ought to be consumed in ways that meet someone's lifestyle. Active people benefit from a higher consumption of carbohydrates versus those with more passive or sedentary lifestyles. Consuming excess carbohydrates could torpedo a weight loss program since the body stores carbohydrates it does not use as fat. Therefore, it is paramount to identify the right percentage of carbohydrates the body needs to function without necessarily storing them as fat. Note that a gram of carbohydrate equates to four calories.[11]

Likewise, people engaging in strengthening exercises should increase the amount of protein consumed to allow muscles to recover and grow. Like carbohydrates, extra proteins are stored as fat and cause weight gain. Note that one gram of protein also equals four calories.[12]

Lastly, as it provides numerous benefits to the human body, fat should be a dietary source. In contrast to carbohydrates and proteins, a gram of fat equals nine calories fat, resulting in a high caloric content.[13]

Understanding how macronutrients affect weight loss allows one to make adjustments and adopt a healthy lifestyle. According to Dr. Brian D. Biagioli, director of a strength and conditioning program, people can maintain their current weight with an intake of 40 percent carbohydrates, 30 percent proteins, and 30 percent fat.[14] On the other hand, people looking to lose weight should decrease their carbohydrate consumption to less than 30 percent of their food intake.[15]

Not understanding these fundamental aspects of nutrition is like trying to qualify at the rifle range without zeroing the weapon. One would be all over the target if lucky

enough to hit it. Comprehending the principles of weight loss allows one to establish nutritional plans suitable to individual needs and goals, ultimately resulting in success.

Conclusion

Losing weight does not have to be an arduous endeavor. Applying the mechanics of weight loss by monitoring your TDEE and intake of calories and macronutrients will yield positive results. There exist numerous websites and apps to help calculate TDEE and measure macronutrient ratios. Other factors such as the "If It Fits Your Macros" (IIFYM) approach, exercise, and proper rest also play a central role in weight loss efforts. ■

Notes

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