

# Cutting Weight...The right way

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Thousands of pages have been written on the subject of sports diet and nutrition. Any wrestler that has spent time analyzing the material has undoubtedly been left confused. Even as you read this article, new diet information will be collected and reported. Many times this new information completely contradicts what was once held as a “tried and true” rule of diet. However, amidst all of this confusing information, there are several important pillars of diet fact that must be followed to achieve fat loss without suffering a drop in performance.

## **Fact #1: Weight loss and fat loss are not the same!**

Many wrestlers mistakenly look for a “good” diet so that they can “cut weight”. If “cutting weight” is really your goal, then it should be an easy task. There are literally hundreds of fad diets on the market, all of which if followed to the letter, will result in the loss of water and/or muscle and/or organ tissue and/or bone tissue and/or fat tissue, resulting in the desired weight loss. Unfortunately, loss of any body tissue besides fat will create huge problems in your performance, both on the mat and in the classroom.

The real focus of a good diet should be the reduction of stored body fat. This reduction of stored fat achieves weight loss, athletic performance is not impaired it is enhanced, as the wrestler is left with a higher percentage of usable weight with which to compete

## **Fact #2: Eliminating entire food groups from your diet is not healthy!**

There are six groups of nutrients that the body needs to operate efficiently. They include proteins, carbohydrates, fat, water, vitamins, and minerals. You need protein for growth and repair of muscle tissue. Carbohydrates are needed to supply the muscles with energy. Fat is needed to cushion and protect vital organs from injury. Vitamins are the “spark plugs” that allow chemical reactions to take place in the body. Minerals are catalysts as well, in addition to being the main ingredient in bones. Water is the substance of life. Among its many roles, water makes up the majority of blood. It serves as the “air conditioner” for the body, supplying sweat that evaporates to take away heat. It acts as the “hydraulic fluid” in the muscle tissue, providing the pressure (strength) needed to move your bones against a force.

These nutrients can be obtained by consuming all of the various food groups found in the Food Guide Pyramid. Eliminating any single one of these groups from the diet leaves the body unable to operate at peak efficiency, resulting in decreased performance. Many popular fad diets eliminate entire food groups entirely. These diets do result in weight loss, but if you use them you will most certainly see a decrease in athletic performance.

### **Fact #3: Attempting to lose more than two pounds per week is risky!**

Your body is very efficient at keeping you alive. One of its many defense mechanisms is to hoard every bit of unused energy in the event that the gravy train ever runs out. It stores all of the excess energy, no matter the source, as body fat. It takes an excess of about 3500 calories to put on one pound of body fat. In order to reduce this stored fat, you must create a deficit between calories consumed and calories expended.

Simply put, to lose two pounds of body fat per week, you would need to create a deficit of 1000 calories per day (3500 c X 2 lbs./ 7 days). Seems simple enough, but there's a catch. In order to meet all of your body's nutritional needs each day, you must consume a minimum of 1200 perfectly balanced calories. For most of us, if we eliminate more than 1000 calories per day from our diet, it does not leave us enough calories in our diet (1200 minimum) to meet all of our nutritional needs.

The result is poor performance. Even worse, if your body perceives that you are not providing it with enough nutrition, it slows down your metabolism (the rate at which you burn fuel) in an attempt to protect you from starvation. This slower metabolism is still with you weeks after the diet is done, making it harder and harder to lose weight!

Is it possible to lose more than two pounds per week? Absolutely! Most of my athletes lose more than that in one typical practice! Is it possible that all of the weight loss would come from fat? No way!

### **So, following these three diet principles, how should a wrestler "cut weight" without hurting his athletic performance?**

First you need to calculate your ideal wrestling weight. Then you should make changes in your daily diet habits that meet all of your nutritional needs, eliminate only the excess, and speed up your metabolism (the rate at which your body burns fuel). Finally, you should get started as soon as possible, and be patient!

**To calculate your ideal wrestling weight**, put away the scales and get out the body fat analyzer. Scales do not tell you how fat you are, they merely calculate how much gravity is pulling on your mass. Have you ever weighed yourself before and after drinking a Coke? Did you really think that you had gained  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a pound of fat? The body fat analyzer should give you two readings, lean tissue (in pounds) and body fat (in pounds). Take the lean tissue reading and multiply it by .06 (6%). Now, add the result of your calculation to the lean tissue. This should give you lean tissue (in pounds) + 6% body fat. (A mathematician would argue that this method of calculation is not entirely accurate. It is quick, easy, and will put you within a pound of accuracy unless you weigh more than 300 lbs.!)

Why 6%? Most experts agree that an athlete should never fall below about 6% body fat. Why not? The body needs a certain amount of fat to protect vital organs. It also relies on the fat to store vital fat-soluble vitamins, and in the event that you cannot eat properly (accident/illness) the body relies on the breakdown of the stored fat for energy. Now that you have found your ideal weight, find the next highest weight class. This is your ideal wrestling weight. Example: ideal weight = 106, ideal wrestling weight = 112.

I completely understand that most wrestlers have a difficult time with this concept. They know that with a strict diet and dehydration that they could easily make the next lower weight class. No argument here! Wrestlers of my generation did it all the time. The UIL rule even allows for you to legally lose 10% of your total body weight. My question to you is; what price are you willing to pay to make that weight? Would you give up muscle and organ tissue to make the weight? Would you give up strength and risk heat stroke to make the weight? Would you risk bone fractures to make the weight? What team are you trying to make, the weight cutting team or the wrestling team?

Now that you have determined your ideal wrestling weight, **you need to evaluate your current diet to look for ways to eliminate excess calories and speed up your metabolism.** Remember that you will need to consume at least 1200 calories each day to meet all of your nutritional requirements. (The reality is, unless you are a dietician, you will probably need more than 1200 calories to get all the nutrition that you really need into your diet.) If you really have enough time to count calories, then by all means go for it! There are at least three diet plans on the market that take into consideration all of the diet information mentioned in this article. They include “Weight Watchers”, “Jenny Craig”, and Richard Simmons’s “Deal-A-Meal”.

The reality is that most of us don’t have the luxury of time or the inclination to stick to a regimented diet. So, for the rest of us, I have listed below thirteen suggestions to help get you started with your diet that do not require you to lug a nutrition guide around, spend a lot of money, or follow a strict diet. These suggestions are designed to decrease the amount of excess calories in your diet and speed up your body’s metabolism.

- Eat breakfast everyday. Your metabolism shuts down if your body thinks it’s starving. You will actually burn up to 20% more calories during the course of a day if you have breakfast. Remember, you either have breakfast, or you are breakfast. (Your body will take the necessary energy from muscles and organs.)
- Eat five or six small meals per day instead of our traditional three meals per day. You eat less if you don’t go to the table starving! In addition, the body uses all of the energy as it comes in. None gets stored as fat.
- Eat dinner early, and don’t make it your big meal of the day. You usually don’t have many activities after dinner so it is difficult to burn many of the calories that you just ate. All calories that remain at the end of the day are stored as fat.
- Do not deprive yourself of water! A glass before each meal reduces your appetite.
- Baked or grilled, not fried. Fat in cooking oils contain 9 calories per gram. These are extra calories that will be added to your food without providing any real

- nutrition. If you don't like the way it tastes when baked or grilled, use seasoning to spice it up.
- Skim milk, not whole milk. Whole milk is 4% butterfat. One glass of whole milk gives you as much fat as if you ate four slices of bacon. Two percent milk has had ½ of the butterfat removed, and skim milk has no butterfat at all.
  - Increase weight training. Muscle burns calories. The more muscular you become, the faster your metabolism burns calories.
  - Learn to make substitutions. For example, when having a baked potato, instead of butter, sour cream, and bacon bits (all loaded with calories), try plain yogurt and imitation bacon bits. Bottle of Gatorade = 220 calories. Bottle of water = 0 calories.
  - Long walks, everyday! Intense exercise, like wrestling or running, burns calories from carbohydrates or proteins. Fat is difficult to breakdown, and the process takes time. When you walk, the body is not rushed to provide energy. After the carbohydrates stored in the muscle tissue are exhausted, the body begins to breakdown pure fat to supply the energy needed for your walk. This usually begins after fifteen or twenty minutes.
  - Cut down on your junk food. A cup of ice cream instead of a bowl. A handful of chips instead of a bag. Less junk = Less calories.
  - Learn to recognize the difference between appetite and hunger. Infants know the difference. You can't make a baby finish a bottle after it is full. Somehow during our childhood, the line becomes blurred. "Finish your dinner...or no desert!" "If you're good, I'll give you a candy bar!" Sometimes we use food as a reward. Sometimes we eat because we're sad, happy, bored, or because it smells so good. Concentrate on learning to eat because you are hungry and your body needs fuel.  
**Eat to live...don't live to eat!**
  - Take time to enjoy your meals. Your stomach has a gauge in it just like the gas tank in your car. The next time you fill up the car, look at the gauge when you start it up. It takes a while for the gauge to register full. Your body is the same way. If you inhale your food, you have often over eaten before you even realize that you were full. Do you remember Thanksgiving???
  - Cut down on protein. Your body uses protein for growth and repair. The American diet is usually centered around the meat dish. Americans usually get way too much protein. This is especially true for teens. The average wrestler needs only as much protein per day as is provided by one four ounce chicken breast. Remember, anything you don't burn up today is stored by the body as fat; even perfectly good protein.

After you have calculated your ideal wrestling weight and have developed a strategy to lose the excess, it is time to get started. **The time to begin your diet is now!** Many wrestlers wait until the last week or two before competition and then begin to worry about making weight. As a result, they end up starving, or dehydrating, or both in order to make the weight. The result is lousy performance. The truth is, **if you feel lousy...you will wrestle lousy.**

Plan at least a week for each two pounds of fat that you intend to lose. If you currently weigh less than 130 lbs. you should plan to take even longer. You are probably not consuming enough food right now to sacrifice 1000 calories per day from your diet and still have 1200 calories left over to meet your nutritional needs. If, while dieting, you notice a loss of strength in the weight room or a loss of stamina on the mat, take a step back and re-evaluate your diet. Are you really getting all of the nutrition that you need? Remember the goal of your diet is to increase your athletic performance. If you have cut down a weight class and now you are weaker, have you really gained an edge in athletic performance? Absolutely not!