

SportsNutrition

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The Athlete's Kitchen

Some athletes, such as wrestlers or rowers trying to make weight for an event, *need* to lose weight quickly. Others, like my client who insisted that slow weight loss would not work for her, just *want* to lose weight quickly. "I know everyone says to lose weight slowly, but I want to get rid of this excess flab NOW!!!!" she declared with disgust.

So what is the best way to lose weight quickly? Do you simply "starve yourself" by eating as little as possible? The answer depends on your long-term goals:

- If you want to lose weight quickly for an event and don't mind regaining the weight quickly, you can indeed "starve yourself" for a few days to drop to the desired number on the scale. Obviously, the better plan is to lose the weight pre-season, to minimize the agony and optimize performance.

- If you want to lose weight *and keep it off for the rest of your life*, don't even think about quick weight loss. It backfires.

While the promise of quick weight loss is enticing, dieters who lose weight quickly on a severe diet inevitably regain the weight, if not more. That's because the body overcompensates for extreme hunger with overeating. You will never win the war against hunger...

Hunger is physiological. Just as your body needs to breathe, urinate and sleep, your body also needs to eat. Urges to overeat often have less to do with will power and more to do with the physiology of hunger. Just as you will gasp for air after having been trapped under-water without oxygen, you will devour food after having been denied calories. Yes, you can white-knuckle yourself to stick to your crash diet, but your well-meaning plan to quickly shed some pounds has a high likelihood of exploding into a demoralizing food binge. Don't go there....it's depressing.

To lose weight and keep it off, you must keep in perspective you did not gain the weight quickly and you should not plan to lose the weight quickly. The better plan is to chip away at weight loss, targeting 0.5 to 2 pounds a week. Why, by just knocking off 100 calories at the end of the day (one cookie, one heaping spoonful of ice cream), you can theoretically lose 10 pounds a year. Knock off 200 calories at the end of the day (16 ounces of cola, 4 Oreos), and you've lost 20 pounds a year. By eliminating just a few hundred evening calories, you will lose weight when you are sleeping, not when you are training or trying to deal with the stresses of your busy day. Eat your calories during the day, when they can help you the most. Then, diet (eat a little less) by night.

Tips for athletes who need to lose weight for an event

Wrestlers, rowers and figure skaters who *need* to shed pounds for an event generally try to eat as little as possible. They fail to understand they could reach their goals by eating more than air. That is, if you eat less than 1,000-1,500 calories, your metabolism slows to compensate for the "famine." The less you eat, the more your body conserves:

- You will feel cold all the time, especially your hands and feet. You won't "waste calories" keeping extremities warm.
- You will feel lethargic and have no energy to (enjoy) exercise, to say nothing of perform well. Observe how you conserve precious calories by fidgeting less, moving minimally, and doing less spontaneous activity than usual in the non-exercise parts of your day.

When you want to lose weight quickly...

- Your resting metabolic rate can drop by as much as 20%. This conserves calories and slows weight loss.

- Weight loss might be half muscle, half fat. Losing muscle is counter-productive to athletic performance. (Be sure to lift weights and eat extra protein to help reduce loss of muscle.)

Should you add on extra cardio to burn calories and hasten fat loss? No. Research suggests exercising while crash dieting does not result in additional weight loss as compared to crash dieting without exercise. Plus, you might end up injured and overtrained, to say nothing of fighting deeper hunger. That is, after grinding through an extra spin class to burn off 600 additional calories, you could quickly wipe out that calorie deficit in less than 3 minutes by succumbing to 12 Oreos the instant you get home. White-knuckling yourself away from food is not fun—and is not sustainable.

Instead of doing extra hard training, plan to increase your non-training activity by walking more, doing projects, cleaning the house, playing with the kids and staying off the couch. Daily activity counts; keep moving during your waking hours so you do not become a "sedentary athlete."

You certainly should *not* eat less than your weight x 10 calories per pound (your resting metabolic rate—what you body requires to breathe, pump blood, and function). Targeting 13-15 calories per pound is still very restrictive for an athlete. That's about 2,000-2,200 calories if you weigh ~150 lbs. Alternatively, reduce your food portions about 20% to 30%, depending on how much time you have to lose the weight. (A sports nutritionist can design a successful reducing plan for you. Use the referral network at SCANdpg.org.)

Divide your limited calories, eating evenly sized meals on a time-line, at least every four hours throughout the day. That could be 500 calories at 7:00 a.m., 11:00 a.m., 3:00 p.m. and 7:00 p.m. Spend those calories on wholesome foods that include protein (to help keep you from feeling hungry) and "bulky" foods like vegetables and broth soups that help fill your tummy with less calories than compact foods (burgers).

Athletes who need to lose weight quickly often restrict fluids. One pound of water can be easier to lose than one pound of fat—but this option should be a last resort. *Ideally, you have planned ahead and lost the weight in the off-season!* Do not sweat away more than 2% of your body weight. (That's three pounds of sweat for a 150-pound person.) More than that can hurt your performance, to say nothing of endanger your health. Hence, if you currently weigh 150 lbs. but need to be 140, you can reasonably lose about 3 pounds of sweat. You will then need to lose "only" 7 pounds of fat, of which half will likely be muscle if you crash diet.

The bottom line: Losing weight quickly is hard work. The wiser plan is to lose weight slowly and be able to keep it off. Trust me, slow weight loss, though not as enticing, is easier and sustainable! Do you really want to do suffer through a restrictive weight reduction diet more than once?

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