This is a long guide, not a quick blog post. It's based on what I've learned guiding clients with this over the last several years. Here's what we'll cover:

- Why Consistency Is Important
- Simplified Counting Rule Suggestions
- How To Make Your Own Counting Rules
- 'The 10% Rule' – Accuracy Targets That Are Accurate Enough

# <u>Why Consistency is Important</u>

Weighing and counting everything to the exact gram for months on end doesn't encourage a very healthy relationship with food, and relying exclusively on packaged goods with a nutritional label isn't a very healthy or tasty way to go either. This is why I suggest that people simplify the way they count their macros rather than driving themselves nuts seeking perfection.

Simplifications will lead to come inaccuracies, however I don't believe that inaccuracies need to matter as long as we're, a) not *wildly* off from what we thought, b) consistent with our cooking & counting methods so that we don't have large variances from day-to-day.
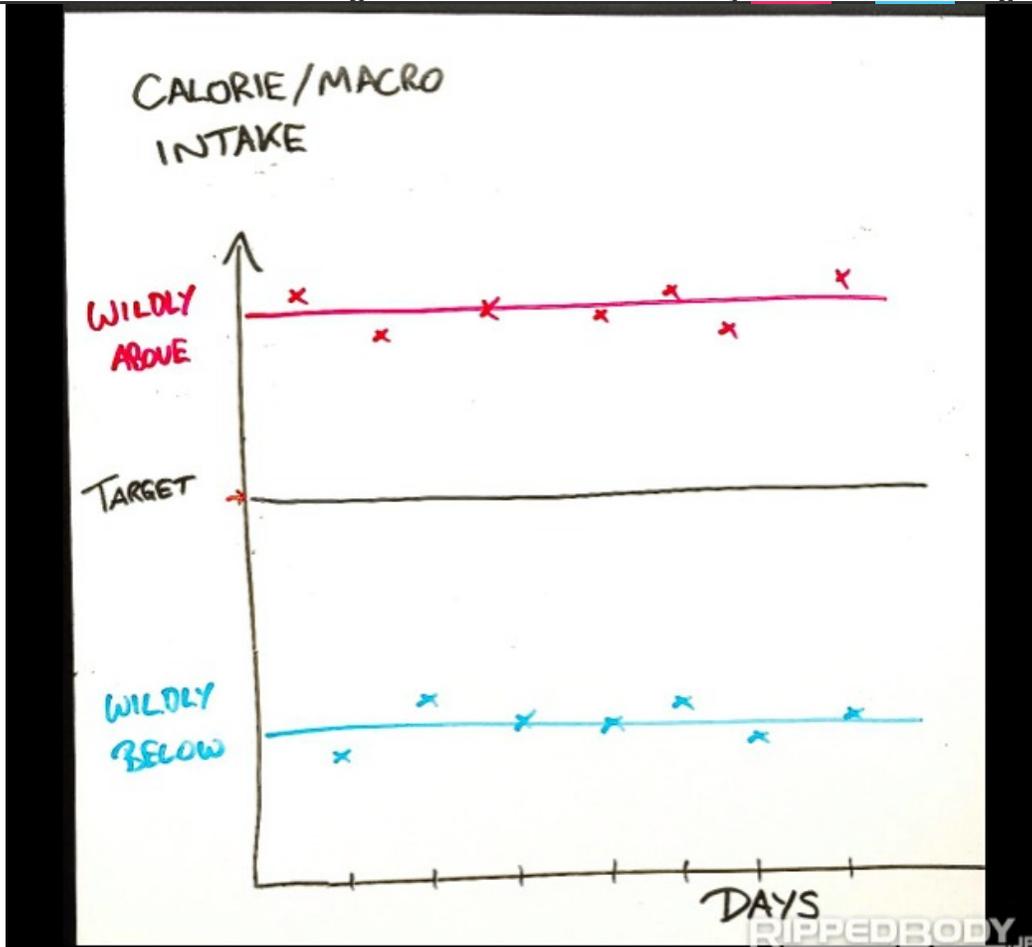
# a) Common Counting Mistakes

## Common Mistake 1 – Miscounting leading to energy intake being way off target

*How does this happen?*

- Your daily lunchtime salad that you thought wouldn't be worth counting (because it's mostly leafy green vegetables) actually has 40g of fat in it because of the dressing.
- You forgot to count the cola/ fruit juices in your diet.

- You've been melting 80g of butter into your coffee each morning because you read that you would burn more fat this way, so you decided not to count it.

**What we don't want: average calorie/macro intake wildly above or below target.**



## Common Mistake 2 – Miscounting leading to large fluctuations in daily energy intake

*How does this happen?*

- After tough days at work you're in the habit of drinking several beers. You count the carbs but forget to count the alcohol. (More on this below.)
- Some days you grill your meat, some days you fry it, some days you *sous vide* it (boiling your meat in a zip lock bag, I hear this is a tasty trend in California). You count the macros as the same regardless of cooking style, forgetting that fat intake will change depending on the method.

**Unacceptable** vs **Acceptable** average daily calorie/macro intake fluctuations from target
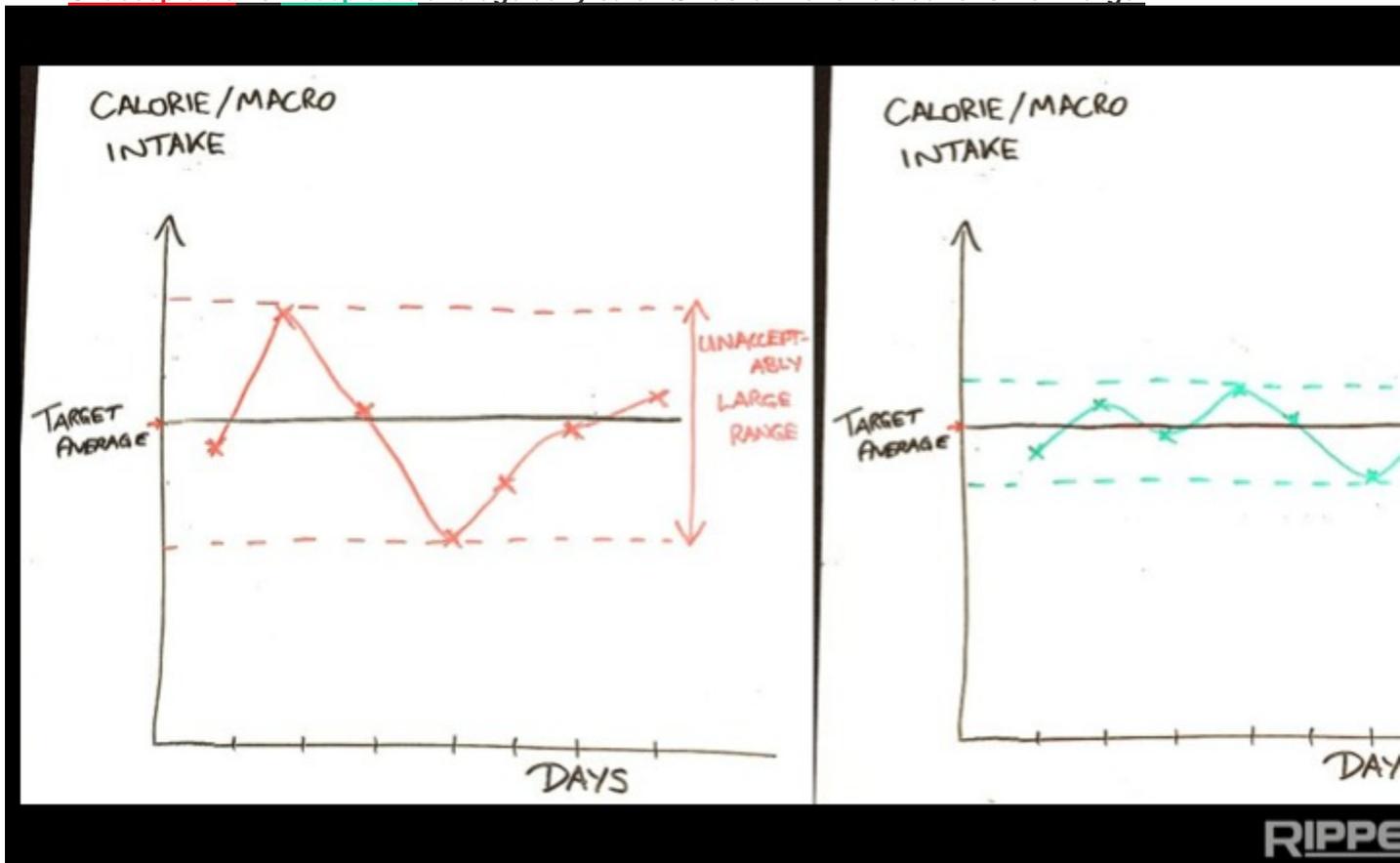


It's too easy for counting mistakes to occur or things to slip in unnoticed into our diets. They quickly add up to big differences, so here's some homework: *Without changing your diet, use a nutritional calculator to count the calories and macros in every single thing except water that you put in your mouth for an entire week.* Use one or a combination of these nutritional calculators / food databases:

**MyFitnessPal Fitocracy Macros – iPhone App. Getmymacros.com Fitday.com/ Calorieking.com/ Wolfram Alpha – Search Engine**

# b) Be Consistent With Counting & Cooking Methods So You Can Make Relative Adjustments

Recall the example of our pet rabbit at the top of the post – the cheeky little bugger is sure to be eating some grass from the garden too, so we won't know his actual energy intake. However, we know that on his current "3 carrots and some grass" diet he's gotten fat, and we can guess that the carrots are going to be the main energy component of the diet, so we know it's likely a good idea to try him on a '2 carrots a day' diet for a while.

We can take a similar approach ourselves. (The difference here is that while the rabbit may start munching more grass from the garden as hunger kicks in – we of course won't do this to ourselves.)

It is not necessary to know exact intake or energy expenditure as long as you are willing to track things and then make adjustments.

**Figure 3 – A manageable (but not ideal) range of calorie intake inaccuracy.**
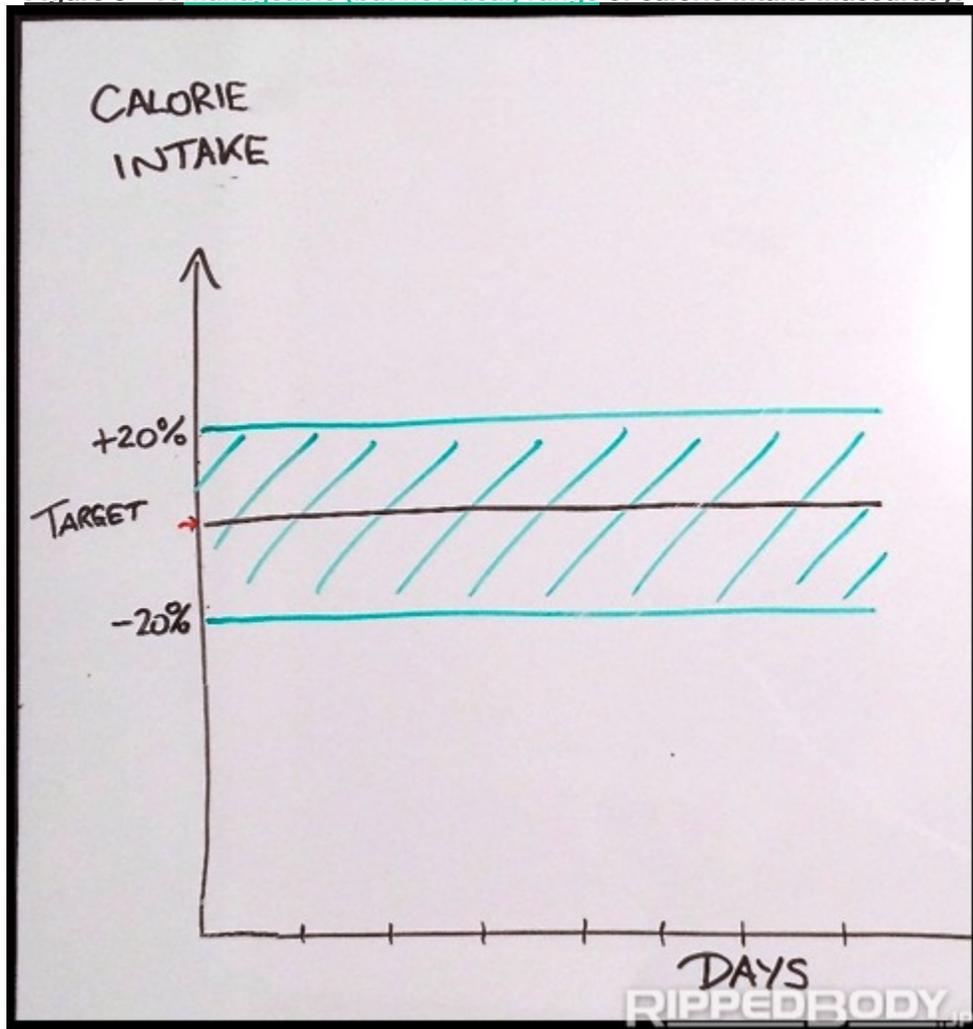
Let's say we aim for the black line as our target intake, but we don't know whether we're over or under 20% of our target – this definitely isn't ideal but if you track things over several weeks, you can adjust things relatively:

- Weight falling to fast? **–** *Increase* calories.
- Weight not falling in line with how you planned? – *Decrease* calories.

I know, that's not rocket science but it's something many folks seem to easily miss. They make complete re-calculations instead of adjusting from their baseline.

***Ah, but what about macros, it surely matters if one is way off compared with the others, right?***

Yes, naturally. We're still counting macros so we're not going to be way off with any of them. We just want to make things easier for ourselves. Here's how.

# **<u>Simplified Counting Rule Suggestions</u>**

*"Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day; show him how to catch fish, and you feed him for a lifetime."*

Ask yourself, it worth the extra mental headache of counting rice as 71g of carbs per 100g of dried weight, or will simplifying it to 70g suffice? I would say that it's well worth going with the simplification. Here are some suggestions.

**Notes:**

- Everything below is a simplification for raw or uncooked foods. Cooked weight simplifications are not given because the water weight they contain will vary depending on the degree to which they are cooked.
- If something is in a packet with the nutritional information label on it, look at the macro content and make your own simplified rule from that. Most things will be listed 'per 100g', others will be 'per serving'. Make sure you double-check and don't just assume that it's to the nearest 100g always or you'll get caught out.

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# <u>Carbs</u>

***1g Carbohydrate ~=4kCal***

Carbs are going to come through your diet in a variety of sources: fruit, starchy carbs, veg and in the other things you don't generally think about like dairy, sauces and drinks.

## **Starchy Carbs** will form the bulk of your carb intake. – (Bread, rice, pasta, potatoes, etc.)

- Raw Potatoes ~15g-20g carbs per 100g weight.
- Sweet potatoes, ~20-25g per 100g weight.
- Dried Rice ~70g of carbs per 100g weight. Works for most dried pasta too.
- Bread – varies (some manufacturers add a lot of butter for flavour). Look at the nutritional label if available or in one of the nutritional calculators.

You'll see that protein and fat content in the starchy carbs has been ignored in the above simplifications. That's purposeful to make things easier, but it's up to you.

***Pro tip:*** *Microwavable rice and other similar things won't conform to the simplifications above because they are partially cooked and have greater water content.*

## Fruit

- Consider one 'medium' sized piece of fruit (an apple, a banana, a pear, an orange, etc.) to be 25g of carbs.
- Other things like berries, melon, etc? Weigh them once and look them up.
- Unsure, or hate the idea of 'medium'? Weigh it once, look it up.

***Pro tip:*** *Avoid smoothies and fruit juice when dieting. – All the sugar, none of the fibre. Easy to 'eat' but not very filling.*

## Vegetables

- Count the carbs in starchy vegetables as they are more energy dense. Examples: carrots, peas, corn, potatoes, parsnips. (When looking these up you'll see that the energy content is relatively high for a vegetable, and fibre content per gram of carbs is low.)
- Don't bother counting the carbs in any leafy, green vegetables.
- Consider ignoring the rest. – Look it up, make a decision, stick to that decision.

***Pro tip:*** *A can of diced or chopped tomatoes is a great idea, but if the math doesn't add up on the ingredient label to what it should normally, that's probably because that particular manufacturer added sugar. You'll want to count the carb content of this in that case.*

**Carbs in other things that add up quickly and are easily missed:**

- Drinks (milk, juice, soft-drinks)
- Dairy
- Protein powder
- Sauces
- Salad dressings

Check the packaging, or look it up and count it against your daily target.

***Pro tip:*** *"Net Carbs" If you come across this, ignore it. You'll likely find it on protein bars or other health snacks if you're into those things. Count the fibre and sugar alcohols in them against your carb target for the day – they still have energy (not as much energy admittedly) but you can't just gorge yourself on these things. Exactly how much energy depends on the fibre type or the sugar alcohol type and is probably a road you don't want to go down.*

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# Protein

***1g Protein ~=4kCal***

- Uncooked beef/ chicken/ pork/ lamb/ fish 100g = ~20-25g of protein.
- One large egg = ~8g protein 5g fat.
- Egg whites = ~4g protein.

The fat content in meat can quickly add up so be careful that your choices of cut don't add up over your fat macro budget for the day. Here are the leanest protein sources:

- Chicken breast (skinless),
- some red meat,
- white fish,
- some cuts of tuna,
- protein shakes,
- Skimmed milk & other low-fat dairy.

To say that I am not a fan of supplement companies would be an understatement. However, I do concede that in most countries in the world, the cheapest way to hit your protein requirements is protein powder, so if you're on a budget then consider this.

***Pro tip:*** *The trade-off to drinking our food is that it is less satisfying, more easily digested, and we get hungry quicker than if it were eating regular food. Casein protein is the most filling type of protein powder due to the slow rate of absorption. For those bulking, liquid food like this or fruit juices can be your friend.*

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# Fat

***1g Fat ~=9kCal***

In contrast to vegetables, fat is highly energy dense. Generally 1g of weight = 1g fat = 9kCal. As the energy content can add up quickly I'd suggest that you consider counting the fat in everything.

***How many grams of fat are in that cut of steak? How about after it's grilled and some fat has dripped off of it, should I weigh the fat and deduct from the total?***

Here's the most sensible strategy – look it up in a nutritional calculator, make you best educated guess at the fat content, and then forget about it. You're likely to eat the same cuts of meat again and again so it won't matter because you'll be following the 'consistency rule'.

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# Alcohol

***1g Alcohol ~=7kCal*** It is difficult to make simplifications for alcohol, especially beer, as each drink will vary. Here is a rough idea though:

- Beer @5%: ~150kCal, ~12g carbs, ~14g alcohol (per 12floz/350ml can/bottle)
- White wine @10%: ~200kCal, ~7g carbs, ~25g alcohol (250g glass, 1/3 bottle)
- Red wine @10%: ~210kCal, 9g carbs~25g alcohol
- Spirit shot @40%: 70/84kCal (25ml/1fl.oz)
- You can look up your favourite beer (or other alcohol) here.

Most generic spirits will be 40% alcohol with no other macro content. You take the amount you drink, multiply by the alcohol content, then multiply by the calories per gram of alcohol.So if you have 4 european shots (25ml) that's 100ml, 100g; 100×0.4×7 = 280kCal. Deduct the carbs from your allowance for the day.

Alcohol isn't part of your three macro targets, but it is going to count towards the daily calorie balance which needs to be maintained, so reduce your carb and fat intake accordingly. If you're going to binge drink then see here.

**Pro tip:** *Zubrowka mixed with apple juice – thank me later.*

# How To Make Some Simplified Counting Rules of Your Own

That above was not an attempt at an exhaustive list. The idea is to give you examples so you can learn how to make them on your own, for the foods that *you* like.

Have a look at this label for 100g of dried

serving size 100 g

| | |
|---|---|
| **total calories** 366 | fat calories 13 |

| | % daily value* |
|---|---|
| **total fat** 2 g | 2% |
| saturated fat 258 mg | 1% |
| trans fat 0 g | |
| **cholesterol** 0 g | 0% |
| **sodium** 14 mg | 1% |
| **total carbohydrates** 73 g | 24% |
| dietary fiber 4 g | 17% |
| sugar 3 g | |
| **protein** 15 g | 30% |

| | |
|---|---|
| vitamin A 1% | calcium 3% |
| iron 19% | vitamin E 1% |
| thiamin 49% | riboflavin 19% |
| niacin 29% | vitamin B6 8% |
| folate 43% | phosphorus 18% |
| magnesium 18% | zinc 10% |

*percent daily values are based on a 2000 calorie diet

(averaged over different types of dry macaroni)

pasta. Here are some examples of simplified rules we can make:

- 100g of dry pasta ~= *70g carbs, 0g fat and 0g protein.*

- 100g of dry pasta ~= *70g carbs, 0g fat and 10g protein.*
- 100g of dry pasta ~= *75g carbs, 0g fat and 10g protein.*
- 100g of dry pasta ~= *75g carbs, 0g fat and 15g protein.*
- 100g of dry pasta ~= *75g carbs, 2g fat and 15g protein.*

**Actual**: 100g of dry pasta = *73g carbs, 2g fat and 15g protein.*

In all but one of the above examples calories will be underestimated. You'll see that they range from least to most accurate top down, with the last barely being a counting simplification at all.

How accurate you wish to be with your rules is up to you – clearly the trade-off to greater accuracy is more complication, however I'd say that it's better to underestimate and over-consume than vice versa. Here's why:

*Fat is slow to gain but can be quickly burned off. Muscle takes a lot of effort to gain, but can easily be lost if there is an excess calorie deficit, inadequate training intensity, or inadequate protein intake.*

*If we verge on the side of under-counting rather than overestimation it's better for lean mass preservation, and a safer long-term strategy overall.*

**Figure 4: Target area of intake to think about when constructing counting rules**
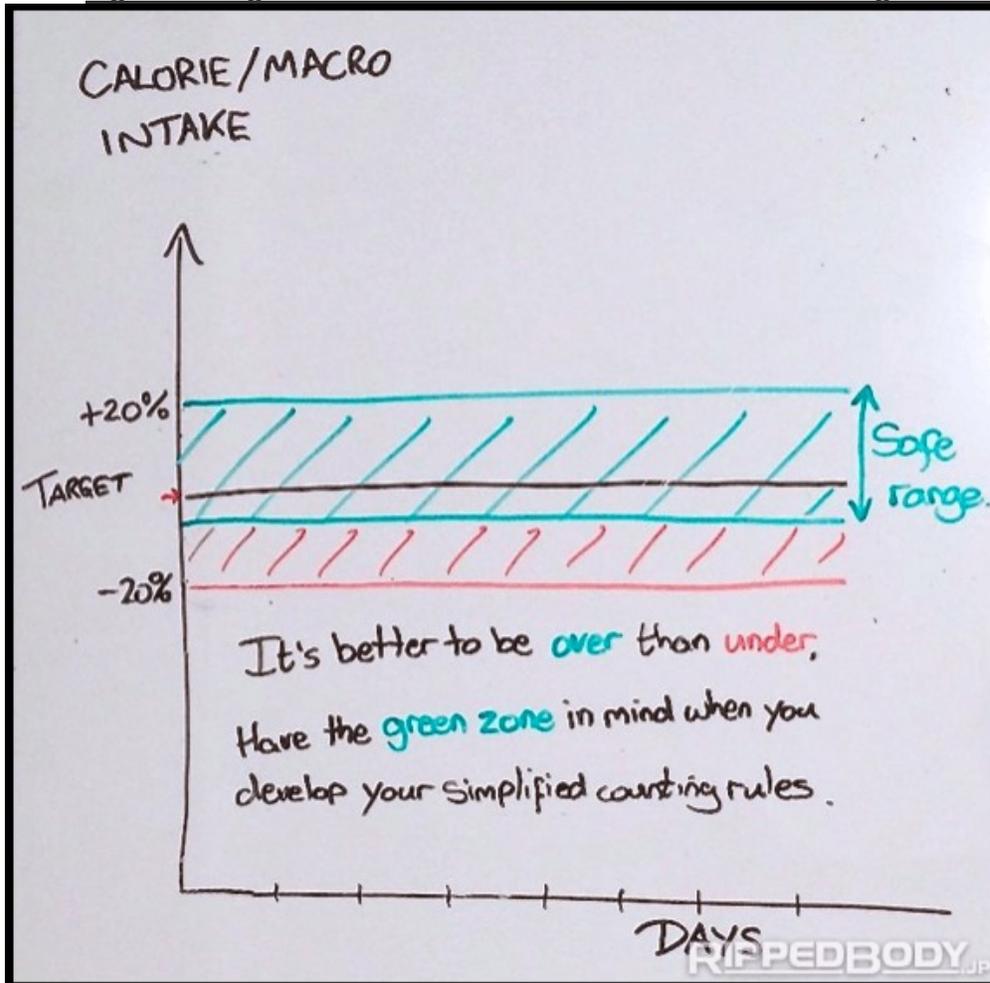


*When dieting, it's better to underestimate and over-consume than vice versa.*

The green area in the figure above represents the target area to be in, and to be thought about when constructing your simplified rules. Basically, we want to be on the black line or slightly above.

# 'The 10% Rule' – Accuracy Targets That Are Accurate Enough

Ok, so we've made our lives a lot easier. We know we're a little inaccurate, but we're in the right range and we're being consistent. Within the counting framework you've created to make life easier, are you now going to shit it all up by aiming to get *exactly* 67g of fat, 173g of protein and 266g of carbohydrate each day? I certainly hope not – this is exactly the all-or-nothing mindset we're trying

*e day, 90% of the time (as long as the other 10% of the time isn't total binge eating) and you'll*
tition, etc. – and are already <10% body fat, tighten this up to 5% either side. This is more for the
g, in case you have to wait for a whoosh for example, than anything else.

to avoid. So this begs the question, *how accurate should we be?*

Practice this for a week or two little and when you can start getting within that +/-10% accuracy target, start tracking.

As much as you think your diet may be varied, the foods that you actually cook from and eat will not be that numerous, so it won't take long to look everything up in one of the nutritional calculators I listed above once. (Just do it when you get home from the supermarket over the next week so that it isn't a chore.)

Make a note of any new foods on a memo sheet ('cheat sheet') and pin it up on the fridge in the kitchen. Put together a few meals out of your favourite foods, and put these meals together so that you have a set of meals for your training days and rest days that fit your macros, then rotate them. Build on this number over time to bring variety to your diet. From here you don't need to recalculate things, you just refer to the cheat sheet up on your fridge.

# FAQ

**What if I don't wish to count at all?**

I've talked about strategies for this in this interview over on Anymanfitness.com.

***Why is it safe to not count most veg?***

Vegetables in general are not very energy dense. With the exception of the few starchy ones it's tough to eat so many that it makes a significant impact to your calorie intake.

*100g of raw tomatoes: ~3g carbs, 1g protein, ~=16kCal 100g of spinach: ~3g carbs, 2g protein, ~=20kCal **vs** 100g of butter =100g fat, ~= 900kCal*

Even if you choose to eat a truly huge amount of vegetables each day to keep yourself full, 1.5kg/3.3lbs for example, and choose not to count any of it, at the worst case we're only talking a ~300kCal increase above what you were counting – if your digestive system were as efficient as a cow that is.

In reality, the energy availability of that veg will be lower than the standard 4kCal per 1g for carbs because it will be mostly fibre, which our bodies are not very good at taking the energy from. Also, it's likely that your gut won't be able to handle such a high amount of fibre anyway, and the severe bloating and/or diarrhoea will get you to limit yourself naturally.

In a nutshell then, fibrous (non-starchy) vegetables aren't something we need to worry about counting. (My fibre and intake guidelines.)

***Are large swings in calorie intake from day to day fine if they lead to the same average intake over time?***

No. The bodyweight change would be the same in both situations, however, this isn't optimal for workout recovery or nutrient partitioning so you'll be fatter with less muscle in the 'wild swing' condition (see: 'common mistake 2' diagram). This is why binge-starve cycles don't lead to ripped physiques.

***Why do you say under-counting is less common?***

People tend to auto-correct. Hunger intensifies and eventually leads to binges followed by more strict adherence. Interestingly this seems to be more common the more dedicated people are, instead of realising that perhaps a small increase in calorie intake across the board is necessary to stave off cravings. Occasional exceptions (i.e. a day with a hike in the mountains) aren't the issue, it's only if an excess energy deficit continues over a long time.

**What about eating out?**

If you're eating out in restaurants all the time, and/or partying your ass off all the time, then no matter how much of a cheat-sheet I give you, you're not going to have success with counting macros so forget it. Diet adherence goes out the window after a few drinks anyway, and it's easy to wake up surrounded by kebab wrappers.

It's difficult to guess what macros are in foods at restaurants (particularly hidden fat), so while you can do your best to eyeball the foods (if you have experience from home cooking to base this on) your diet is not going to be accurate enough *overall* if the frequency you eat out is too high. – Nobody said there wasn't a tradeoff.

**Why not use one of those macro calculators forever?**

You can do that, but I don't see it as being a long-term sustainable strategy.

**What about [insert food here]?**

Look it up in a calculator, make an executive decision on what you deem to be a reasonable simplification for this food, stick to it and that way you have the 'consistency rule' covered. If this worries you, press this button and come back.

**Oh but I live in country x and the food is really, really oily/strange.**

Excellent. The least fatty cuts of meat will probably be the cheapest ones in your supermarket. Rejoice friend. The food is weird you say? Come try the supermarkets in Japan. I have to skip past the octopus, whale, & cod semen to get to the meat & poultry section every day.

***I live in a country where the nutritional information is not typically listed on food packets or in restaurants?***

Your best bet is to cook at home. Rice, pasta, potaties, quinoa, etc… these basic carbs have the same nutritional info everywhere, so even though it may not be listed on the packet in your supermarket, just weigh it and then google it in english to get the nutritional information. Same principle with vegetables and meat also. You just need a small kitchen scale which may cost you $10.

***I prefer to count everything. Is this ok?***

That can be absolutely fine. However, it's also an indication of a slightly OCD personality, and for that reason you may benefit from letting go to reduce stress.

***Ah, but now I can't throw my macros up onto a forum to ask if they look right. What say you?***

Sure, but do you want multiple unqualified opinions on whether your macros are 'correct' or is that going to just confuse the situation? You can read these calorieand macro setting guides to see if they are in the right ballpark yourself. From there, "*Are these macros right?*" is the wrong question to be asking, it should be, "*How are these macros working for me?*"

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Alright, I think that's enough for today. Let's talk about putting your macros into meal plans and using 'balancing foods' to get to within those 10% targets another day.