

How to Lean Bulk: The Ultimate Guide

By [Philip Stefanov \(Edit\)](#) Last updated March 16, 2018



A bulk is a period of time that is dedicated to [muscle growth](#) and strength gain. It also includes some sort of a caloric surplus that facilitates these anabolic adaptations.

This period, depending on the aggressiveness of the surplus also results in some fat gain. This is a necessary and, for most people, an unavoidable “side effect” of trying to build muscle mass.

In terms of training, this period of time is less restrictive. More training volume and a higher training frequency can (and in most cases should) be used. And progress on a weekly and monthly basis is much more noticeable.

During a [fat loss period](#), your goal is to cut out the “fluff” from your body and training while focusing on maintaining performance on a few key lifts. During a bulk, you get to expand your training and include much more accessory work.

Some people get things mixed up, so let me clear something up:

A bulk is NOT a period of time where you stuff yourself with everything you can get your hands on. That is an eating disorder.

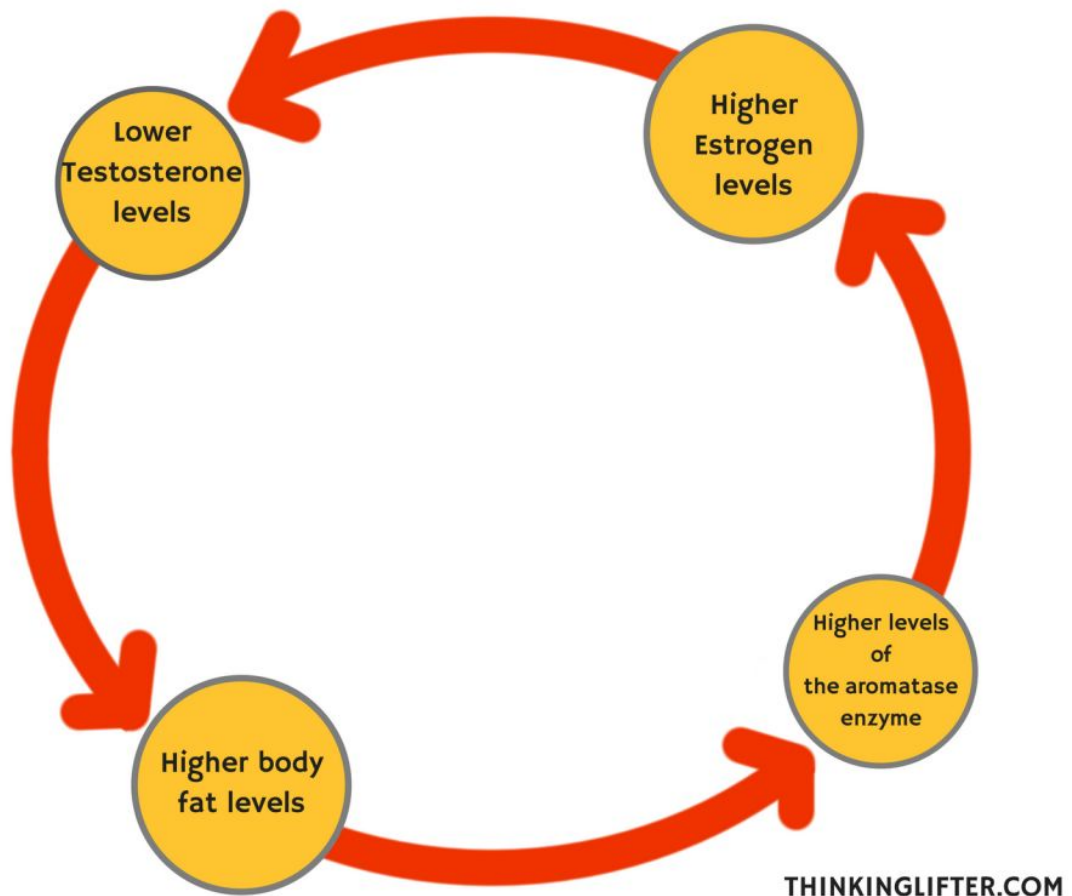


The #1 Requirement You Should Meet Before Going on a Bulk

A favorable body composition.

By that I mean at or around 10-12% body fat. If you're over 15-20%+ body fat, I recommend taking some time to get down to 10-12% and then starting your bulk. There are a few reasons why:

1) A higher body fat percentage is generally associated with higher estrogen and lower testosterone. Fat contains the enzyme aromatase, which converts testosterone to estrogen. Also, lower testosterone makes it easier for you to gain fat and more fat further reduces your testosterone. It is an ongoing cycle.



2) A higher body fat percentage is associated with poor insulin sensitivity. This influences how much of the weight you gain will be muscle and how much will

be fat. Lower insulin sensitivity means that more of the energy you consume is stored as fat.

3) Lower-grade inflammation, associated with obesity has been shown to decrease anabolic and increase catabolic signaling. How these signals change with lower levels of body fat (say, around 20%) remains to be studied.

4) Starting a bulk when you're leaner generally allows you to bulk for longer and look better in the process. It's much better (physiologically and physically) to bulk from 12% to 20% body fat than to do so from 18% to 27%.

5) If you decide to stop bulking at 15-16% body fat instead of 20%+, you'll have much less fat to lose. If you want to get lean for the summer, you can start cutting later. If you need to get lean for a photoshoot, you can bulk for a few extra weeks and put on a bit more muscle mass. You also risk less muscle loss with a shorter fat loss period.

Put in simpler terms, starting off leaner will allow you to train harder, recover better, build more muscle mass, and look better in the process. The way I see it, there's no debate.

How Quickly Can We Expect to Build Muscle, Realistically?

Before we can get into specifics on bulking, we first need to know what is a realistic rate of muscle growth. As we pile on year after year of proper training behind our backs, the rate of muscle growth decreases.

By taking a moment to see how far you've come with your training, you can more accurately predict how much muscle mass you can gain on a month to month. Provided, of course, you train well and eat enough calories.

Training experience can be categorized in a few different ways, with the most popular one developed by Lyle McDonald. His method is based on years of proper training:

Year of Proper Training	Potential Rate of Muscle Gain per Year
1	20-25 pounds (2 pounds per month)
2	10-12 pounds (1 pound per month)
3	5-6 pounds (0.5 pound per month)
4+	2-3 pounds (not worth calculating)

Credits:

<http://www.bodyrecomposition.com/muscle-gain/whats-my-genetic-muscular-potential.html/>

Alan Aragon has his own model, as well:

The Alan Aragon Model	
Training Level	Potential Rate of Muscle Gain Per Month
Beginner	1-1.5% Total Bodyweight
Intermediate	0.5-1% Total Bodyweight
Advanced	0.25-0.5% Total Bodyweight

Credits: Alan Aragon <https://alanaragon.com/>

Martin Berkhan puts lifters in one of three categories: beginners, intermediates or advanced trainees. His categories are based on strength levels.

If you focus on getting better at the core barbell lifts (deadlift, bench press, and squat), you can check Martin's guidelines and where you stand. Or, you can refer to Lyle's graph.

Now, based on where you put yourself, you can roughly estimate how much muscle mass you can gain on a monthly basis.

Beginner (less than a year in the gym): 2-3 lbs. / 0.9-1.2kg.
Intermediate (1 to 4 years of proper training): 1-2 lbs. / 0.45-0.9kg.
Advanced (4+ years of proper training): 0.5lbs / 0.22kg.

Some thoughts:

- Gauging exactly how many years of proper training you have behind your back can be difficult. For example, you might have been lifting for 5 years, but only started training properly 3 years ago. For most people, categorizing yourself should be a combination of Lyle and Martin's models.
- Taller guys should strive to gain weight at the upper end of the ranges from above.
- Beginner lifters with more muscular development (due to previous history in sports or a [physically demanding job](#)) and more strength can benefit better from gaining as an intermediate lifter.
- More "advanced" lifters who can't tell how many years of proper training they have and are weaker than what Martin's guidelines suggest can benefit from gaining as an intermediate lifter.

How to Calculate Your Caloric and Macronutrient Needs for Bulking (Step-by-Step)

We'll be tossing the term TDEE (Total daily energy expenditure) below quite a bit, so let's go over how to calculate it:

First off, calculate your BMR using this formula:

English BMR Formula

Women: $BMR = 655 + (4.35 \times \text{weight in pounds}) + (4.7 \times \text{height in inches}) - (4.7 \times \text{age in years})$

Men: $BMR = 66 + (6.23 \times \text{weight in pounds}) + (12.7 \times \text{height in inches}) - (6.8 \times \text{age in year})$

Metric BMR Formula

Women: $BMR = 655 + (9.6 \times \text{weight in kilos}) + (1.8 \times \text{height in cm}) - (4.7 \times \text{age in years})$

Men: $BMR = 66 + (13.7 \times \text{weight in kilos}) + (5 \times \text{height in cm}) - (6.8 \times \text{age in years})$

Credits: <http://www.bmi-calculator.net/bmr-calculator/bmr-formula.php>

I've found it to be one of the more accurate methods out there. I don't recommend most online calculators because they underestimate your calorie needs.

Now that you've calculated your BMR, calculate your TDEE using this multiplier:

Harris Benedict Formula

To determine your total daily calorie needs, multiply your **BMR** by the appropriate activity factor, as follows:

- If you are sedentary (little or no exercise) : Calorie-Calculation = $BMR \times 1.2$
- If you are lightly active (light exercise/sports 1-3 days/week) : Calorie-Calculation = $BMR \times 1.375$
- If you are moderatetely active (moderate exercise/sports 3-5 days/week) : Calorie-Calculation = $BMR \times 1.55$
- If you are very active (hard exercise/sports 6-7 days a week) : Calorie-Calculation = $BMR \times 1.725$
- If you are extra active (very hard exercise/sports & physical job or 2x training) : Calorie-Calculation = $BMR \times 1.9$

Credits: <http://www.bmi-calculator.net/bmr-calculator/harris-benedict-equation/>

Now that you know how much energy your body needs, you're already ahead of most regular gym goers.

From here, add the needed calorie surplus to that number (to ensure that you're feeding your body with enough energy to build muscle).

Going Deeper: How to Calculate Macronutrients

Now it's time to split your calories between carbs, fats, and protein. For those of you who don't know what macros are, they are the components that make up food. Also, read [this](#).

Each macronutrient has a certain number of calories per gram. Protein and carbs have 4 calories and fats have 9 calories per gram.

Protein is First

Protein is of great importance for us lifters. It helps [maintain muscle mass](#), as well as build more of it.

Protein is also [very satiating](#). If you're the type of person who struggles with hunger, even when bulking, eating a bit more protein could help blunt your hunger.

As far as intake goes, 1 gram per pound of body weight is enough to maximize its effects. If you weigh 180 pounds, aim for 180 grams of protein. Simple.

Same for you ladies. If you weigh 125 pounds, eat 125 grams of protein daily.

Carbs and Fats are Second

Splitting up your remaining calories between carbs and fats should be based on your personal taste, but there are two rules to keep in mind:

Get between 0.3 and 0.6 grams of fats per pound of body weight. If you weigh 180 pounds, aim for 54 to 108 grams of fat/day ($180 \times 0.3 = 54$, $180 \times 0.6 = 108$). At the very least, 15% of your calories should come from fats.

If you're eating around 3300 calories per day, 15% is 495 calories ($3300 * 0.15 = 495$), which is 55 grams of fat ($495 / 9 = 55$).

Why?

Dietary fat is an integral part of any balanced diet. Fats support metabolic function, cell signaling, immune system function, hormone production, and the absorption of important nutrients (such as vitamin D and A).

Fats also add texture and taste to meals and take longer for the body to break down and absorb, which makes you feel full for longer.

There is much to be said about dietary fat, but it's beyond the scope of this guide. If you're interested, read [All About Healthy Fats](#).

Finally, on to carbohydrates. Once you have your protein and fats numbers, calculating carb needs is pretty straight-forward:

Leave the remainder of your calories for carbs.

Let me give you an example (warning: **basic math ahead**):

You're eating 3400 calories per day and weigh 180 pounds.

You'll need 180 grams of protein ($180 * 4 = 720$ calories) and 54 to 108 grams of fats ($54 * 9 = 486$ calories, $108 * 9 = 972$ calories).

The remaining calories go to carbs. In our case:

$3400 - 720$ (protein calories) = 2680;

$2680 - 486$ (fat calories) = 2194 calories;

Now, split 2194 by 4 (number of calories per gram of carbs).

$2194 / 4 = 548$ grams of carbs;

Or, if you go with the high end of fats intake (0.6g/lb), the example would look like this:

$3400 - 720 = 2680$;

$2680 - 972 = 1708$;

$1708 / 4 = 427$ grams of carbs per day;

The higher your fat intake, the lower your carbs need to be and vice-versa. Don't stress too much about it. Get enough protein, eat within your range of fats and get the remaining from carbs.

Also, aim for 10-15 grams of fiber for every 1000 calories you eat.

Fiber provides many health benefits and keeps you regular. Fiber also fills you up, which is a nice bonus, especially if you are one who struggles with hunger.

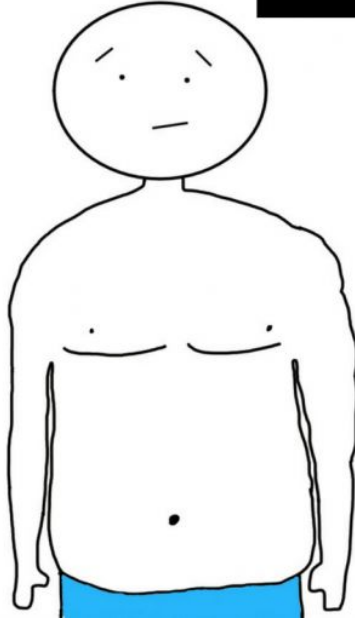
Foods that are high in fiber are generally high in volume and low in calories. If you're interested in learning more about fiber, read [this](#).

The 3 Main Ways to Bulk (and One Way to Get Really Fat)

A caloric surplus is what it is, sure. But, depending on how big it is, there are 3 main ways to bulk (and one way to get really fat):

#1: The Relaxed Bulk

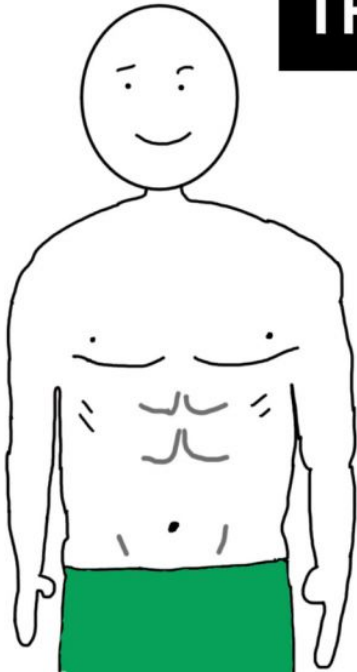
THE RELAXED BULK



A favorite for many as it doesn't require any calorie and macronutrient tracking. You get to eat freely, you build decent amounts of muscle, but you also gain quite a bit of fat in the process.

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#2: The Lean/Slow Bulk

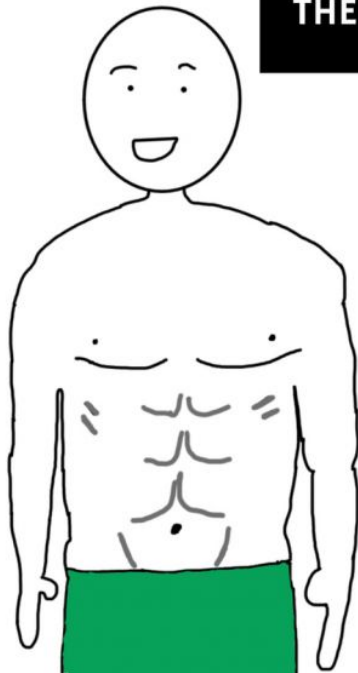


THE LEAN/SLOW BULK

A much more structured approach to bulking with close calorie and macronutrient (or at least, protein) tracking with the goal of gaining muscle with minimal fat in the process.

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#3: The Borderline Maintenance Bulk



THE BORDERLINE MAINTENANCE BULK

Much like the lean bulk, here you're also tracking your calories and macronutrients closely, but the goal is to eat just at maintenance, which in theory, would make you gain only muscle mass, but very slowly.

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#4: The.. um.. Eating Disorder Bulk?

Um.. anyway..

THE DIRTY/DREAMER BULK

Unlike the 3 options for bulking, this one is downright eating yourself into oblivion. The people who fall for this are usually newbies and gym bros who don't know any better.
(This is a really good way to get fat.)

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Goddamn it, Timothy,
put that down! We
are trying to take a
photo!



THE "DIRTY BULK" FALLACY:

Such people think that a big part of the total weight gained is going to be muscle, despite the body's limited ability to do so. Most people find out after one dirty bulk that it is very impractical and the "few pounds" of fat that they'll need to lose in the spring are actually 40+.



Some, however, stick to this type of bulking and either stay fat for years or go through strenuous fat loss periods with huge swings in body weight. These drastic reductions in body weight usually lead to a rebound effect and most of the fat is gained back.



Aside from looking like crap through most of the year, their health also takes a hit and so does the body's ability to build muscle (referring back to the calorie partitioning part from earlier in this guide).



Bottom line?

It is a stupid way to go about bulking. Most people go through it once, see how dumb it is and never do it again.

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Assuming that your end goal is reaching your maximum muscular potential and not just turning into a fat ass, we'll break down the 3 ways to bulk and mostly ignore the 4th one.

1. The Relaxed Bulk

When doing the relaxed bulk, you don't track calories or macronutrients. The amount of fat you gain is higher compared to the other two methods, but you don't care as long as you get to build muscle mass.

You don't have to worry that you might not be eating enough because you'll be gaining weight on a weekly basis. With that in mind, you'll still keep the

realistic rates of muscle growth in mind. You won't kid yourself that the 5 pounds you gained in the last month are all muscle.

There is a principle in economics called “Diminishing returns”. In essence, this principle states that in all productive processes, there comes a point at which adding more of one factor of production (for example, hiring more people or buying more equipment to assemble cars) while keeping everything else constant (for example, the number of cars these people can work on at the same time) starts yielding smaller marginal gains.

How does this relate to bulking?

There comes a point at which eating more calories will not further optimize muscle growth as long as everything else is constant (training, recovery, drug-free status). Some people are under the impression that if eating 3500 calories per day will make them gain muscle mass, then eating 4500 calories per day will be even better.

The reality is, the latter option will just make them fat and not build muscle any faster.

How to do it:

This is pretty simple: eat plenty of food. As long as you're somewhat conscious about your protein intake and are gaining weight, you're in the clear. Because you'll most likely gain more fat, you'll compromise [calorie partitioning](#) to some degree.

Also, tracking progress during a relaxed bulk is going to be tricky. We all store fat differently and taking body measurements is not going to do you much good. I recommend tracking body weight.

Weigh yourself every morning after going to the bathroom and take weekly and monthly averages.

You should aim to gain 0.75-1.25 lbs./0.3-0.5 kg. of weight per week or 3-5 lbs./ 1.3-2.2 kg. per month. If you're gaining weight at a faster rate, consider reducing your food intake a bit.

Now, some of you might be thinking:

"This is what I'm going to do!"

But before you do, read the 3 drawbacks to this approach:

Drawback #1: Gaining too much fat might not be good for you, appearance-wise.

We all store fat differently and have different bone structures. Getting to a higher body fat percentage might be bad for you.

Some people are genetically blessed with good proportions and favorable body fat distribution. They usually have a pronounced v-taper even at higher body fat percentages thanks to their wide shoulders and narrow waist.

They might also store fat mostly around their legs and butt and stay relatively lean in the upper body.

Take for example Christian Guzman in [this picture](#).

He's in the middle of his bulk and his abs are quite blurry. Arm vascularity is not the best either. But, as you can see, his waist is narrow and he's still got a nice v-taper.

People like him can get away with higher body fat percentages and still look very decent.

But, there are other people with narrow shoulders and wide hips that have a pear-like shape that is exacerbated by higher levels of body fat. If your bone structure is like this, then being at a higher body fat might not be good for you.

There's also the issue of fat gains in the face. Some people have a relatively chiseled face even at 18-20% body fat, where others aren't so lucky. If you're not comfortable with that and feel self-conscious, then doing a relaxed bulk is not worth the trade-off.

Drawback #2: Gaining too much fat will likely reduce your hunger and make further gains much more difficult.

I'm referring to the [body fat set point theory](#) and the role of the hormone leptin. The theory states that everyone has a certain body fat and weight range that their body likes to stay in and does everything in its power to do so. It looks like this:

Where people end up after losing too much weight and body fat (in most cases, too quickly):

- Very big appetite
- Decreased metabolic rate
- Very easy to gain weight

Where most people are at most of the time:

- Normal appetite
- Metabolic rate is high enough
- Losing or gaining weight is not difficult

Where most people end up after a prolonged bulking period:

- Lack of appetite
- Increased metabolic rate
- Very difficult to gain more weight

Below a certain body fat and body weight

FUNCTIONAL RANGE

Over a certain body fat and body weight

Lower end of your "functional range"

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Upper end of your "functional range"

For most guys, this range is between 12% and 20% body fat. Getting below or above it either reduces your metabolic rate and increases your hunger or increases your metabolic rate and reduces your hunger, respectively.

This is mainly thanks to the hormone leptin. This hormone is the main regulator of body weight, metabolism, and hunger, among other things.

Leptin is synthesized in the fat cells and the more fat you have, the higher your leptin levels will be. This usually results in a reduction in appetite and an increase in your metabolic rate.

But, the leaner you get, the lower your leptin levels go. This results in a decrease in metabolic rate and an increase in hunger. An exception to this are naturally lean guys who didn't have to diet to get there.

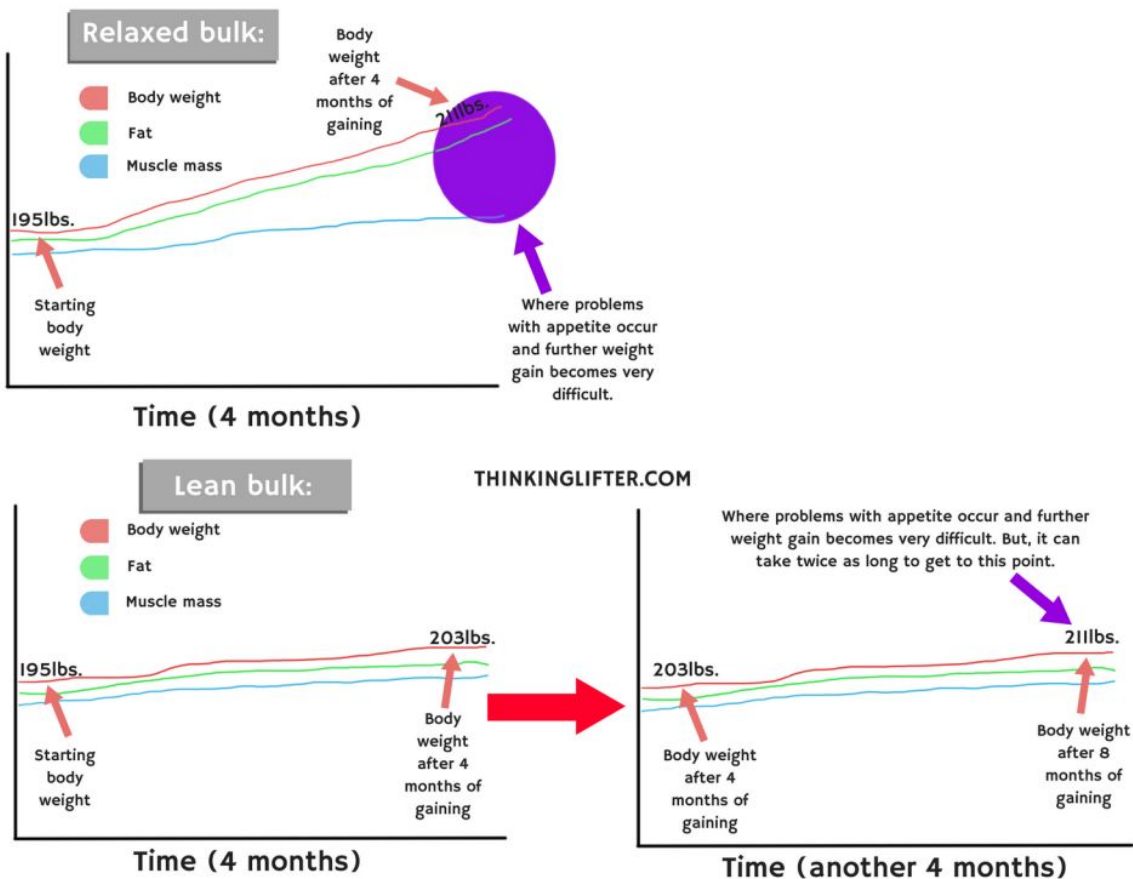
Bottom line?

This usually results in you staying within a certain body fat and body weight range where you feel good and have a normal appetite.

Now, what does this have to do with doing a relaxed bulk?

Getting yourself to the high end of your “functional range” too quickly can compromise your bulk, because your appetite will drop and your metabolism will increase. This often results in having a very difficult time eating enough calories to further gain weight.

Here’s an example diagram of what this might look like:



You can counter that by doing a slower bulk and gaining much less fat for every pound of muscle.

Drawback #3: Eating intuitively can be good for some people, and a disaster for others.

While I do believe that everyone should at least try and adopt a “normal human” way of eating while still making great progress in the gym and not getting overly fat, there are drawbacks.

For some people, this style of eating doesn't work the way it should. In my mind, there are two types of people that struggle with [intuitive eating](#) and rarely get anywhere:

- **People with naturally big appetites.** This type of person has always struggled with their weight and cravings. They can't eat one cookie and stop. And if they try to eat intuitively, they will most likely get fat. These people need a more structured approach to eating that includes tracking calories and knowing when to stop.
- **People with naturally small appetites.** We all know at least one person who “*can't seem to gain any weight*” no matter what they do.

(Except, of course, to eat.)

This person, also known as a “hardgainer” usually has a faster metabolism and a terrible appetite. If they don't consciously remind themselves, they can get by the whole day without eating.

These people also need structure and, at times, some force-feeding to meet their calorie requirements for weight gain.

2.The Lean/Slow Bulk

The lean bulk is a much more structured approach to gaining weight. You make systematic calorie increases based on your progress (or lack thereof) with the goal of steadily building muscle mass with little fat.

The drawback of this approach is that, for extended periods of time, you might not be eating in a caloric surplus and limiting the growth you can achieve. Tracking minor body weight increases can be difficult especially when considering things like:

- Your body's ability to gain/drop pounds-worth of water and glycogen weight;
- Constipation that could occur for one reason or the other;

These bodily functions can often swing your body weight up and down a few pounds at a time and blur the picture.

How to do it:

Much like with the relaxed bulk, here you also need to establish a caloric surplus, only a smaller one. To do that, you first need to calculate your estimated total daily energy expenditure (TDEE) and add a small, 150-200, calorie surplus.

Once you have that, start tracking your body weight weekly averages and adjust as needed. Let's do an example calculation:

Say you've calculated your TDEE to be 3000 calories/day. This is the number of calories you eat to maintain your body weight.

Now, we'll add a 200 calorie surplus and end up with 3200 calories per day.

As you're tracking your caloric intake (and protein, at least), track your body weight in the morning, after going to the bathroom, at least 4 times per week (ideally - 7). Take the weekly average number and compare week to week.

Example #1:
Week 1 average: 186.4lbs./84.5kg.
Week 2 average: 187lbs./84.8kg.
Week 3 average: 186.8lbs./84.7kg.

Although the physical activity and caloric intake are going to be consistent, small fluctuations in weight are normal. In the above example, you would keep the calories at 3200 for another week or two and then decide if you'll increase them.

Example #2:
Week 1 average: 186.4lbs./84.5kg.
Week 2 average: 187.4lbs./85kg.
Week 3 average: 188.5lbs./85.5kg.

In this example, we can see that the speed of weight gain is more than we'd like. In this case, we scale back the caloric intake by 100/day for another two weeks and see what happens.

Example #3:

Week 1 average: 186.4lbs./84.5kg.
Week 2 average: 185.6lbs./84.1kg.
Week 3 average: 185.2lbs./84kg.

In this example, not only is the average weight not going up, it's actually going down. This most likely means that you've either lost some water weight or actual fat.

Whatever it is, bumping the caloric intake by 100/day is the way to go. Track your body weight at 3300 calories/day for two weeks and see how it changes.

This is the whole premise of a lean bulk:

Track -> Gaining weight and making progress in the gym? -> Keep things the same

Track -> Not gaining weight and stagnating in the gym? -> Bump calories a bit

Track -> Gaining weight too fast? -> Decrease calories a bit.

How to do this after a fat loss period:

These examples are all well and good, but things are a bit different if you try to do this after a fat loss period. Mainly, raising your calories back to maintenance improves your hormonal profile, increases your metabolic rate and non-exercise activity thermogenesis (NEAT).

Metabolic rate is somewhat easier to predict as it usually improves gradually. But, NEAT is individual and some people experience severe changes in their TDEE during and after dieting.

Let me give you two examples to illustrate:

Example #1:

Person 1 has dieted for 13 weeks and has lost a fair amount of fat. His metabolic rate has downregulated a bit, which is normal. But, during the diet period, his NEAT has gone down a lot.

He felt sluggish most of the time and generally kept his activity low, aside from lifting and doing some cardio.

Now that his diet is over, he's feeling much more energetic throughout the day and his TDEE is going up at a fast rate. He's also much more active throughout the day.

After the initial 400 calorie/day increase, he starts raising his calories from week to week. But, he realizes that even after 6 weeks of increasing his calories, he's still nowhere near a caloric surplus for weight gain.

Week 1 average(2700 calories/day): 181.2lbs./ 82.1kg. (still in a caloric deficit)
Week 2 average(2850 calories/day): 181.0lbs./ 82.1kg. (still in a caloric deficit)
Week 3 average(3000 calories/day): 181.1lbs./82.1kg. (still in a caloric deficit)
Week 4 average(3100 calories/day): 181.2lbs./82.1kg. (possibly still in a caloric deficit)

Week 5 average(3250 calories/day): 181.0lbs./82.1kg. (possibly still in a caloric deficit)

Week 6 average(3400 calories/day): 181.1lbs./82.1kg. (likely around maintenance at this point)

Week 7 average(3500 calories/day): 181.3lbs./82.2kg. (starting to get somewhere)

Week 8 average(3600 calories/day): 181.5 lbs./82.3kg. (definitely getting somewhere)

Example #2:

Person 2 also dieted for 13 weeks and lost a fair amount of fat. His metabolic rate went down a bit, which is normal. But, unlike Person 1, Person 2 didn't experience such big drops in his NEAT.

He remained energetic despite the deficit and didn't reduce his daily activity. Thanks to that, he also managed to diet on more calories compared to Person 1.

Now that his diet is over, after the initial 400 calorie/day increase, he begins raising his calories from week to week to find his maintenance.

Week 1 average(3000 calories/day): 181.2lbs./ 82.1kg. (still in a caloric deficit)

Week 2 average(3200 calories/day): 181.2lbs./82.1kg. (likely around maintenance at this point)

Week 3 average(3350 calories/day): 181.3lbs./82.2kg. (starting to get somewhere)

Week 4 average(3500 calories/day): 181.5 lbs./82.3kg. (definitely getting somewhere)

As you can see, these are two examples of how NEAT can influence your caloric needs, especially after fat loss.

Bottom line?

If you've been in a caloric deficit for an extended period of time, you'll need a few extra weeks to find your true maintenance. After that, you can add a surplus to that number.

Where do these numbers come from?

We covered a lot of info and I gave you some examples of what it could look like. But you might be wondering "*Where do these numbers come from?*". And that's a valid question.

- It takes roughly 2500 kCals to synthesize a pound of muscle (or roughly 5500 kCals for a kilo).
- It takes roughly 3500 kCals to burn or store a pound of fat (or roughly 7700 kCals for a kilo)

If we assume a generous 1:1 ratio of muscle to fat gain (on a slow bulk, not on a relaxed one), we should aim to gain 2 pounds of **body weight** per month and hope that half of it is **muscle**. To do that, we'll need roughly 6000 kCals (2500 for the pound of muscle, 3500 for the pound of fat) over maintenance for the month, or roughly 200 calories/day ($6000/30=200$).

You might be thinking, "*Why don't I eat in a 2500 monthly surplus? Won't that lead to more muscle and less fat gain?*"

I'll show you why you need this caloric "buffer" for muscle growth in the next section.

3.The borderline maintenance bulk

In theory, doing a bulk like this brings the best of both worlds:

- You get to build muscle mass over time;
- You get to stay lean;

Up until a few years ago, if you were to ask most people how to bulk, they'd tell you to eat a lot. The idea, as stupid as it is, is that if you want to build muscle mass, you need to eat enormous amounts of food. The fat gain is not only expected but necessary.

Today, there's a tendency among most people to go to the other extreme, where this borderline maintenance bulk takes place.

The supposed idea is that you'll gain muscle while putting on no fat in the process, as long as you take this very slowly.

The theory sounds promising. But in reality, there are a few major issues with this approach:

Issue #1:

As we already discussed above, it takes roughly 2500 calories for your body to synthesize a pound of muscle. But, the body doesn't use calories for the sole purpose of muscle growth. There are also other needs:

Organ or Tissue	Metabolic Rate (kcal/kg/day)	Metabolic Rate (kcal/lb/day)
Adipose	4.5	2.0
Muscle	13	5.9
Other	12	5.4
Liver	200	90.9
Brain	240	109
Heart	400	181
Kidneys	400	181

Other refers to bone, skin, intestines and glands.

Credits to: bodyrecomposition.com

When you're eating in a very small caloric surplus, your body will put very little calories towards actual muscle growth and more to other important things like.. you know.. keeping you alive.

For that reason, creating this "buffer" of calories ensures that you build actual muscle over time and don't plateau.

Issue #2:

If we assume that building a pound of muscle mass takes roughly 2500 calories, gaining a pound of fat takes 3500 calories, and calculate a monthly surplus of roughly 2400-3000 calories (or 80-100/day), you can see how you'd be limiting your muscle-building potential.

Assuming a generous 1:1 ratio of muscle to fat gain, you'd realistically gain somewhere between 0.5 and 0.7 pounds of body weight and 0.25 and 0.35 lbs. of actual muscle each month. The remaining would go to water, glycogen and, of course, fat.

Issue #3:

Tracking your progress on such a "bulk" is very difficult when you're lean and downright impossible if you're over 12-13% body fat. The gains would be so small that noticing changes would be very difficult.

Issue #4:

Most people cannot (and should not) commit to such a slow way of bulking as there are other, much more efficient ways to go about it. Trying to stay too lean during the gaining phase will most likely make you spin your wheels and not get anywhere.

How to do it:

Much like the slow bulk, here you also need to calculate your TDEE and add a very small surplus of 80-100 calories/day.

Taking the same example from the slow bulk section, let's use a TDEE of 3000 calories/day. To that, we add 100 calories and end up with 3100/day.

Bodyweight changes will be minimal here but you need to be very strict with your tracking. If you start gaining weight faster than the estimated ~0.7lbs. per month, reduce your caloric intake a bit.

Track your body weight in the morning, after going to the bathroom every day. Take the weekly average number, compare week to week and calculate the gains every 4 weeks.

Here are 3 examples:

Example #1:
Week 1 average: 186.4lbs./84.5kg.
Week 2 average: 186lbs./84.3kg.
Week 3 average: 186.2lbs./84.4kg.
Week 4 average: 186.1lbs./84.4kg.

As you can see, the weekly averages are fairly consistent. In this case, we can bump the calories by 100/day and track for another 4 weeks.

Example #2:
Week 1 average: 186.4lbs./84.5kg.
Week 2 average: 186.7lbs./84.6kg.
Week 3 average: 187lbs./84.8kg.
Week 4 average: 187.3lbs/84.9kg.

In this example, the weight gain is more than what we're aiming for. But, it depends on the individual. They can either keep intake the same for another week or two or decrease caloric intake by about ~50/day.

Yes, I know what I said. 50 calories. But you want "lean gains", right?

Example #3:
Week 1 average: 186.4lbs./84.5kg.
Week 2 average: 186lbs./84.3kg.
Week 3 average: 185.7lbs./84.2kg.
Week 4 average: 185.5lbs./84.1kg.

In this example, the lifter is losing weight which would indicate that they are in a very small caloric deficit. We can do a bigger bump in calories of about 200-250/day and track for another 4 weeks.

Bottom line?

This option is much like the slow bulk one. You need to track your calories, macronutrients, and bodyweight and make adjustments as needed. The only difference being the "promise" of gaining muscle with no fat in the process.

I do believe that this method also leads to some fat gains, but at a slower rate. If you were to gain ~0.7lbs. of fat per month on a slow bulk, you'd gain ~0.25-0.35lbs. on this one but also less muscle mass.

Which Option is Best and What You Need to Consider

Now that we've looked at the 3 ways to bulk, let's see which one is optimal for most people and where you can use the other 2 methods.

1. Pros and Cons of Relaxed Bulking

Pros:

- You won't have to worry whether you're eating enough calories to build muscle.
- You get to eat more freely and not obsess over calories and macronutrients.
- You'll likely gain strength at a faster rate compared to the other two methods.

Cons:

- You'll gain much more fat during your bulk and need a longer fat loss phase.
- Your calorie partitioning is going to tip in favor of more fat gains compared to muscle gain.
- Depending on your bone structure and fat distribution, you might not be all too happy with the way you look at a higher body fat percentage. (Narrow shoulders and love handles don't make for a great v-taper.)
- Gaining too much fat will likely reduce your hunger and make eating enough calories difficult. This will impact the length and quality of your gaining phase.
- If you have a bigger appetite, having the freedom to eat ad libitum can make you really fat really quickly. And seeing as muscle growth

is limited, I don't see the need to gain 40 pounds of weight in a few months.

- You can form a bad relationship with food and lose the ability to eat in moderation. I don't need to explain why this is bad.

Who is it for?

If I'm being honest, I don't recommend this type of bulking to anyone who is natural. Seeing as muscle growth is limited, I don't think it's wise to put on weight fast. You'll then have to diet down for 4+ months to reach a respectable body fat percentage.

To be clear to those who think that they are the exception to the rule:

No, Billy. You didn't gain 30 pounds of muscle in the last 6 months. And you're not ~18% body fat. What happened is you pushed your bulk way too fast and gained too much fat. These "30 pounds of muscle" are more like 4-5 and the "~18% body fat" is 25%+.

If you gain any extra muscle mass with this method, you'll most likely have to sacrifice it once you start cutting down. Not to mention the psychological drag of having to eat in a caloric deficit for months on end.

2.Pros and Cons of Lean Bulking

Pros:

- You still get to eat a lot of food when compared to the relaxed bulk. You'll need to track your calories and know when to stop.
- You'll make steady progress in the gym and enjoy the benefits of being lean even months into the gaining phase.
- More of the weight you gain will be actual muscle thanks to the better calorie partitioning.
- You'll get to bulk for longer periods and build more muscle mass. If it takes you a year to go from 10% to 17-18% body fat, you'll likely build

much more muscle than if you were to go from 10% to 17-18% body fat in a matter of 3-4 months with the relaxed bulk.

- You won't have to diet down for months after you're done bulking. If you do things correctly, you'll have less than 15 lbs. of fat to shed before you're lean.
- You build the habit of eating in moderation and knowing when to stop.
- You can see muscle gains more easily because you'll have less fat covering them.

Cons:

- You might waste some time eating at or below maintenance and not really build muscle mass during that time.
- Tracking calories and macronutrients every day can get tedious.
- Tracking body weight 4-7 days/week can also get tedious.
- You won't make dramatic visual changes from week to week. It will take months before you can see more pronounced visual improvements. That takes patience.
- You'll have to make minor changes more often, which can also get tedious.

Who is it for?

This is the best option for the majority of lifters out there. You build muscle mass, you gain strength, you look like you lift, you get to eat quite a bit of food, and you don't have to spend much time losing fat after that.

The downsides, as I stated, are just a few.

3.Pros and Cons of Borderline Maintenance Bulking

Pros:

- You get to keep your precious six-pack year-round and still make some progress in the gym.

- You rarely have to dip into a caloric deficit and if you do, it would be only for the occasional mini-cut.
- More of the weight that you gain will be actual muscle thanks to the better calorie partitioning.
- You build the habit of eating in moderation and knowing when to stop.
- You can see muscle gains more easily because you'll have less fat covering them.

Cons:

- Visual progress is very, very slow. Most people don't have this kind of patience.
- The progress you make in the gym will also be slow. You won't notice dramatic improvements in strength gains or work capacity.
- You might waste some time eating at or below maintenance and not really build muscle mass during that time.
- Being meticulous with your calories and macronutrients every day can get tedious.
- Tracking body weight 7 days/week can also get tedious.
- You'll need to fine-tune your training and nutrition more often.

Who is it for?

This approach suits advanced lifters who put a great priority on staying lean year-round. They also need to know very well what they're doing with their training and nutrition.

This approach also works great for people who depend on their visual appearance to make money (sponsorships, photo shoots, modeling, etc.) and have to be very lean almost at a moment's notice. Also, they aren't in a great rush to build the last 5-6 pounds of muscle mass that they are capable of.

Speed of Weight Gain: How it Influences Muscle to Fat Gain Ratio

Muscle to fat ratio refers to the percentage of calories that your body uses for muscle repair and growth as opposed to fat storage.

There are a few factors that influence the muscle to fat ratio, such as:

- Whether you're training or not;
- What your body fat percentage is;
- How good/poor your insulin sensitivity is;

And very importantly for the context of this guide:

- How quickly you're trying to gain weight;

This, perhaps, is the single most important factor that influences muscle to fat gain ratio.

Simply put, with all other factors being equal, if we were to take two identical twins and put one on a lean bulk and the other on a dirty bulk, the one doing the lean bulk would gain as much muscle as his brother, but with less fat.

Let's get into some more specific numbers (and speculations). Do keep in mind that the examples below are more conceptual, rather than hard facts. They should serve as a rough guideline rather than concrete evidence.

1.Borderline Maintenance Bulk Muscle to Fat Ratio Gain

With a very small surplus of 80-100 calories/day and an approximate gain of ~0.7lbs. of body weight per month, most people can expect to gain muscle and fat at a 2:1 ratio in favor of muscle.

Meaning, for every 3 pounds of body weight that you gain, ~2 will be muscle mass and 1 will be stored as fat. Keep in mind that some of the body weight gains will be water and glycogen.

2. Lean Bulk Muscle to Fat Ratio Gain

With this approach to bulking, you'll be using a slightly bigger caloric surplus of around ~200-250/day. This would translate to roughly 2 pounds of body weight increase per month. You can expect to gain muscle and fat at a 1:1 ratio.

Meaning, out of the 2 pounds you'd gain each month, half would be muscle and half would go as fat.

3. Relaxed bulk muscle to fat ratio gain

This approach is a bit more difficult to predict as we don't really have a set number of our caloric surplus. Just for an example, we can put the surplus at an average of 500/day for the duration of the gaining phase.

A 500 calorie surplus per day will result in a 15,000 surplus for the month. As we stated above, it takes your body roughly 2500 kCals to build a pound of muscle and 3500 kCals to build a pound of fat.

With a 15,000 calorie surplus per month, this would lead to ~3-5 lbs./ 1.3-2.2 kg. per month. Of that, you can hope that 1-1.5 pounds will be muscle. Some will be water and glycogen and most will be pure fat.

Calorie Cycling: Theory vs. Reality

Calorie cycling is a method of raising and lowering daily calorie intake, usually in coordination with training. There are many ways to cycle your calories and it usually depends on your current goals and preferences.

For the context of this guide, we'll discuss how it could help with your muscle-gaining efforts.

Theory

Most people tend to burn more calories on training days and fewer on rest days. Thus, cycling between days of higher caloric intake and days of lower intake in coordination with training and rest days seems smart.

You support your body with more energy on training days and consume less food on rest days. This sounds good on paper, but does it work in real life?

Reality

To build muscle at an optimal rate, you need a caloric surplus over an extended time period. Whether you achieve that caloric surplus with 4 high-calorie days or 7 moderate calorie days likely won't make a difference.

If you eat at maintenance on rest days and in a surplus on training days, you likely won't notice an improvement over a linear style of eating. Also, the unnecessary complication could get tiresome.

Still, if you are interested in trying it for yourself and don't mind a bit of complication, let me give you an example:

Say that you're training 4 days per week: Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday. You've calculated your caloric needs at 3200/day for muscle growth. We'll multiply the 3200 calories by 7 to get the weekly needs.

$3200 * 7 = 22,400$ weekly calories.

Now, we bump our training day calories to 3500, multiply that by the training days (in our case, four) and divide the remaining calories by the number of rest days (in our case, three).

$22,400 - (3500 * 4) = 8400$ calories.

$8400 / 3 = 2800$ calories.

So, training days: 3500 calories. Rest days: 2800 calories.

Monday	Training / 3500 calories
Tuesday	Training / 3500 calories
Wednesday	Off / 2800 calories
Thursday	Training / 3500 calories
Friday	Training / 3500 calories
Saturday	Off / 2800 calories
Sunday	Off / 2800 calories

Is Intuitive Eating a Good Strategy?

If you've read so far, you might be asking yourself:

“Well, calculating calories and macronutrients seems like a lot of hassle. Can’t I eat intuitively and make progress?”

And this is a valid question so allow me to elaborate.

You see, most people see the bulking phase as an “open season” on the fridge. They reason that stuffing themselves with food will make them gain more muscle. In reality, they get fat and need to spend a lot of time losing the excess fat later.

In today’s obesogenic environment, it’s SO EASY to overeat every day. You can go to your local grocery store, pick up some junk food for \$10-15 and stuff yourself with thousands of calories in a matter of hours.

Don’t believe me? Check out a few of the “10k calories challenge” videos floating around Youtube.

What’s more, if you look at a few statistics, you’ll notice that we are a lot fatter than people in the previous century.

Key facts

- Worldwide obesity has nearly tripled since 1975.
- In 2016, more than 1.9 billion adults, 18 years and older, were overweight. Of these over 650 million were obese.
- 39% of adults aged 18 years and over were overweight in 2016, and 13% were obese.
- Most of the world's population live in countries where overweight and obesity kills more people than underweight.
- 41 million children under the age of 5 were overweight or obese in 2016.
- Over 340 million children and adolescents aged 5-19 were overweight or obese in 2016.

- Obesity is preventable.

This is a direct quote from [here](#).

A great percentage of the total population eats intuitively (aside from the 2 weeks of rigid dieting some people undergo every spring to “*get in shape for the summer*”) and we are getting fatter and fatter.

In today’s overabundance of tasty food and social pressure to eat (come now, I know you’re not going to McDonald’s with friends to get a green salad), relying on intuitive eating is foolhardy and most people tend to eat way more food than they need.

This is why I prefer a more structured approach to bulking and putting effort into your tracking. That way, you get to build a decent amount of muscle mass over time and not get fat in the process.

I’ll admit, tracking your food intake, training and body progress can be tiresome at times. But, once you’ve established the habits, doing so won’t seem like a chore and you’ll be much better off in the long term.

On the other end of the spectrum, people with a small appetite never seem to eat enough to gain weight and spin their wheels for months, even years. They think that they’re eating enough, often claiming that they are stuffing themselves with food all day long.

But the truth is, you might need to eat a lot more food than you think and the only way to get there is to track your intake every day and aim for a specific number.

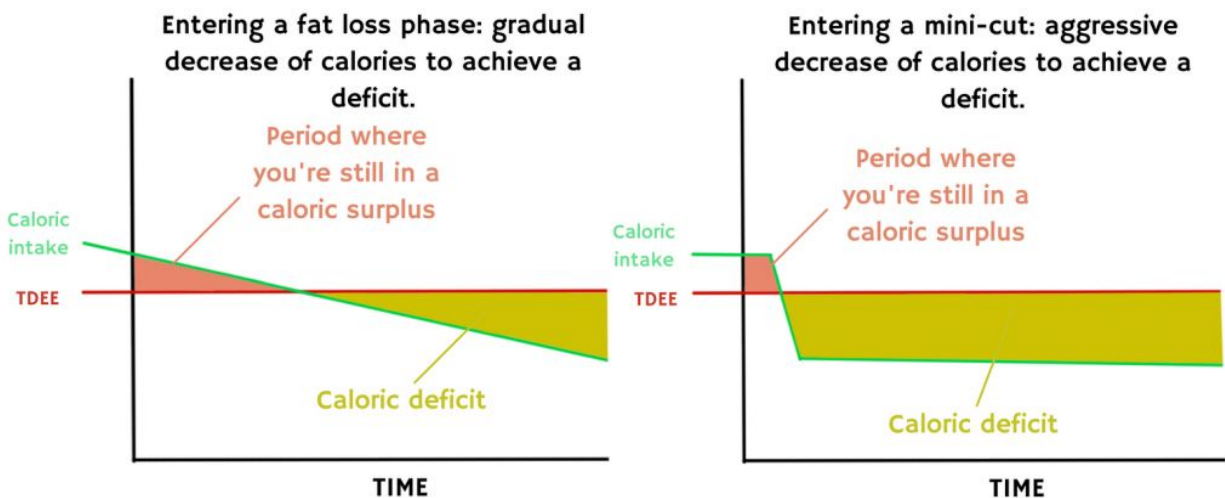
“*I ate a lot today.*” doesn’t sound as concrete as “*I ate 3700 calories today.*”

What are Mini-cuts and When You Might Like to Consider Doing One

Mini-cuts are short periods of calorie restriction with the main goal of losing some of the excess fat that you've accumulated. The goal is to go in and out quickly (usually within 2 to 6 weeks) and get right back into the gaining phase.

Unlike the actual fat loss phase, with mini-cutting, your goal is to be more aggressive with the caloric restriction. Because it's only for a few weeks, you don't need to change your training much.

You should jump right into the deficit and not waste any time by slowly decreasing your calories (which is a good idea if you're planning for a longer fat loss phase). Keep your training relatively the same, at least during the first 3-4 weeks and push for further progress in the gym.



Let me give you an example of what it might look like:

Say you've been eating in a surplus for the last 14 week and you train 5 days per week. Depending on how big your surplus is, you can go ahead and

reduce your caloric intake by 500 to 700/day for a week and see where it puts you.

Keep in mind that you'll likely drop a few pounds very quickly due to water and glycogen depletion, not necessarily fat.

After the second week, you can reassess and either keep your calories the same or decrease them again.

The goal is to jump in aggressively, lean down a bit and get right back on track with building muscle mass.

Who is mini-cutting best suited for?

- If you're planning to do a long gaining phase (6-8 months+) it's a good idea to fit a short mini-cut here and there.
- If you're having trouble eating in a smaller caloric surplus and gain weight faster than you'd like, you'll benefit from a mini-cut every 3-4 months.

How and When to Make Changes to Your Diet for Ongoing Progress

Setting up your diet for bulking is a great first step. The only problem is just that - it's the first step. And the first step is only going to get you so far.

In other words, the number of calories you'll need to get from point A (for example, 180 lbs.) to point B (185 lbs.), won't be enough to go from point B (185 lbs.) to point C (190 lbs.).

As you gain more weight and muscle mass, your caloric needs are going to increase. If you're not tracking your progress closely, you can spend a good amount of time eating less than you should.

Because of that, I recommend tracking your body weight 4 to 7 times per week, taking the weekly average and looking at the trend over time.

Say, for example, you've been gaining a steady 0.6-0.7 pounds of body weight per week for the last two months. Now, over the last couple of weeks, your weight has been stagnating and you're at an average of 189.2 lbs.

At this point, it's time to bump your calories by 100-150 per day and track for another two weeks.

If, at that point, your body weight starts going up again, keep it up. If, however, you're still not gaining any weight and your average is still at 189 lbs., then bump calories by another 100-150 per day.

Food Sources: **As Long As They Fit Your Macros, They Don't Matter... Or Do They?**

I don't like the if it fits your macros (IIFYM) approach and mentality.

The term IIFYM has this incorrect connotation and most people fall into the trap that *"As long as I hit my macronutrient numbers, the foods don't matter."*

While hitting your caloric numbers and macronutrients is very important, it's one side of a coin. Calorie quality matters.

IIFYM is one extreme, but there's another: "clean" eating.

Unlike IIFYM, where most people take it up as a challenge to shove as much junk down their throats as they can, clean eating is the opposite. With it, the goal is to eat only “clean” foods: veggies, lean meats, fish, dairy products, fruits, etc.

This is all well and good but it makes people develop this black and white, good and bad mentality towards food. Where a meal that consists of fish and veggies is “good”, foods like chocolate and pizza are inherently “bad”.

And these people are the ones who avoid the “bad” foods that they love because they think that pizza will go straight to their abs.

The solution?

Adopting a [flexible dieting](#) mindset.

But isn't flexible dieting another word for IIFYM?

No, and here's why:

Where IIFYM follows the rule of *“hit your macros for the day, the foods don't matter”*, flexible dieting is different.

With flexible dieting, your goal is to hit your macros for the day but with a more balanced and “adult” approach to nutrition. With it, you get 80-90% of your calories from whole, nutritious foods and the rest are left for your treats.



IIFYM Dieting

- ✓ Adequate caloric and macronutrient intake
- ✓ Balance between protein, carbs, and fats
- ✓ Includes mostly foods you like
- ✓ Meals are easy to prepare
- ✗ Meals make you feel full for longer
- ✗ Adequate vitamin and mineral intake
- ✗ Not relying on supplements to make up for lacking nutrition
- ✓ You don't have to plan meals in advance
- ✗ Fundamentally good for your health
- ✗ No energy crashes or afternoon fatigue
- ✗ Allows you to maintain a healthy relationship with food



Flexible Dieting

- Adequate caloric and macronutrient intake ✓
- Balance between protein, carbs, and fats ✓
- Includes mostly foods you like ✓
- Meals are easy to prepare ✓
- Meals make you feel full for longer ✓
- Adequate vitamin and mineral intake ✓
- Not relying on supplements to make up for lacking nutrition ✓
- You don't have to plan meals in advance ✗
- Fundamentally good for your health ✓
- No energy crashes or afternoon fatigue ✓
- Allows you to maintain a healthy relationship with food ✓

Set S.M.A.R.T. Goals and Track Your Bulking Progress

Tracking your progress is very important:

- It keeps you accountable when your progress slows down or stops.
- It keeps you motivated to keep going when you see improvements.

Without decent tracking, you can't be sure how well (or poorly) your bulk is going and that could lead to a lot of wasted time. To track progress properly, you need to set S.M.A.R.T. goals and couple them with proper tracking techniques.

What are smart goals?

S - Specific

M - Measurable

A - Attainable/Achievable

R - Realistic

T - Time Bound

Specific: A specific goal is much more likely to be carried out compared to a vague one. A specific goal includes details which makes it much easier to break down into actionable steps.

A vague goal is: *"Bulk up"*. A specific goal is: *"Gain 12 pounds over the next 8 months."*

Measurable: Such a goal makes it easy for you to track progress and the more specific the goal is, the easier it is to measure.

For example, going back to the specific goal, “*Gain 12 pounds over the next 8 months.*” You can measure your progress by breaking it down on a month-to-month basis.

On the other hand, there’s not much you can measure about “*Bulk up.*”

Attainable/Achievable: I’m all for ambition, but most people generally go about goal setting the wrong way. They set goals too difficult to achieve and after the motivation wanes, they usually give up.

This is why setting goals that are achievable will make it much more likely for you to go through.

“*But if the goal is achievable and easy, then I’m not progressing, am I?*”, I can hear you thinking.

The solution is simple: achieve a goal, then set another, and another. Small victories add up and build momentum.

Realistic: Again, this ties in with attainable goals and it’s important. It’s realistic to set a goal to gain 12 pounds in the next 7 months. It’s not realistic to set a goal to gain 50 pounds in the same time frame. (Well, you can do that, but you’ll turn into a fat ass.)

Time Bound: Setting a time frame for your goal is crucial because it keeps you accountable and makes the goal more specific and measurable.

If you set the goal to gain 2 pounds in the next 30 days, you are much more likely to follow through and achieve it. Compare that to “*Bulk up.*”

The second goal is much vaguer and you're more likely to get into a dirty bulk mindset and get fat.

Alright, you need to set S.M.A.R.T. goals and you need to keep track of them. When it comes to bulking, slow and steady wins the race.

Depending on your training age, you should aim to gain 1-3 pounds of body weight per month.

If you're at or above 20% body fat, I recommend taking some time to cut down to 10-12% before going into a bulk.

Now that we've gone over goals, here are the most important things to keep track of during a bulking phase:

#1: Body Weight

Changes (or lack thereof) in body weight are one of the best ways to track your bulking progress. But to do things efficiently and to track accurately, you need to be doing daily weigh-ins.

Why?

Let's take two people as an example. Jim and Dwight. Dwight measures his weight once a week or so, but Jim does it daily. Both of them have set a goal to gain 2 pounds of weight per month.

Dwight measures his body weight on Sunday morning: 197.3lbs./89.4kg. Next Sunday morning, he does the same. This time it shows 199.1lbs./90.3kg.

So:

Sunday: 197.3lbs./89.4kg.
Monday: N/A
Tuesday: N/A
Wednesday: N/A
Thursday: N/A
Friday: N/A
Saturday: N/A
Sunday: 199.1lbs./90.3kg.

Whoa, Dwight is gaining weight way faster than he should. Or is he?

Not necessarily. Let's now take Jim as an example.

He measures his body weight every morning and takes the weekly average:

Monday: 197.3lbs./89.4kg.
Tuesday: 197.4lbs./89.5kg.
Wednesday: 197lbs./89.3kg.
Thursday: 198lbs./89.8kg.
Friday: 197.6lbs./89.6kg.

Saturday: 196.9lbs./89.3kg.

Sunday: 199.1lbs./90.3kg.

Average weekly weight: **197.6lbs./89.6kg**

Week two goes like this:

Monday: 197.5lbs./89.5kg.

Tuesday: 197.7lbs./89.6kg.

Wednesday: 197.3lbs./89.4kg.

Thursday: 198.2lbs./89.9kg.

Friday: 198lbs./89.8kg.

Saturday: 197.3lbs./89.4kg.

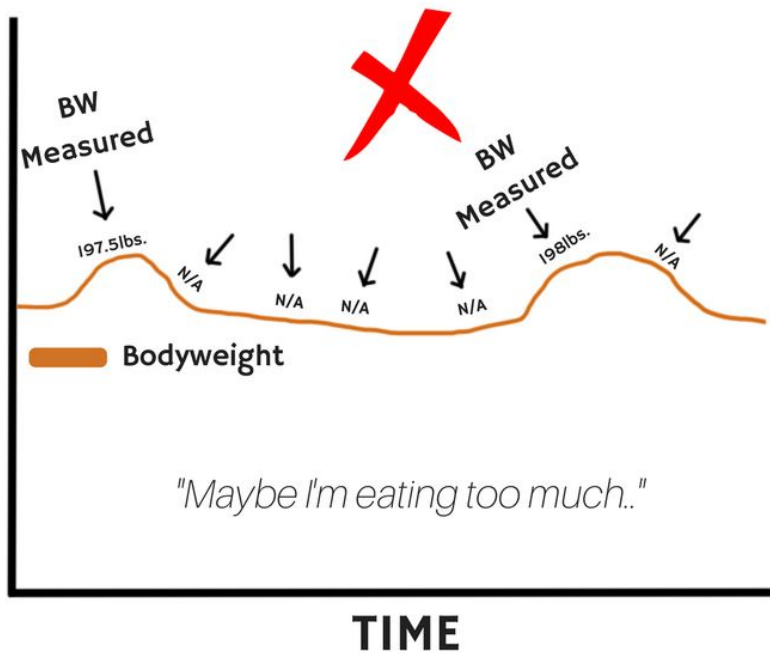
Sunday: 197.8lbs./89.7kg.

Average weekly weight: **197.8lbs./89.7kg.**

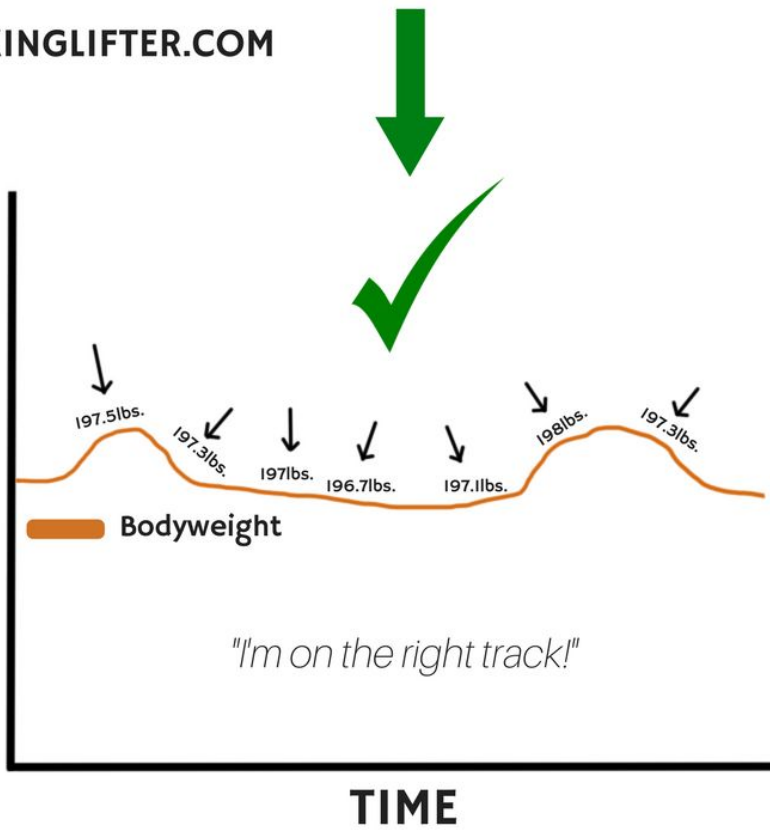
Jim is up 0.2lbs/0.1kg.

Because Jim is taking his daily weight, he can see the normal fluctuations and the trend of his body weight.

Dwight, on the other hand, is sabotaging himself by measuring his weight only once a week. If his weight fluctuates up on the exact day he takes his measurement, he assumes that he is eating too much.



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Track your weight daily, in the morning on an empty stomach and take the weekly average. Compare week to week and see how your weight changes over time.

If you're gaining weight too quickly or not gaining any, you can make adjustments to your diet.

#2: Progress Pics

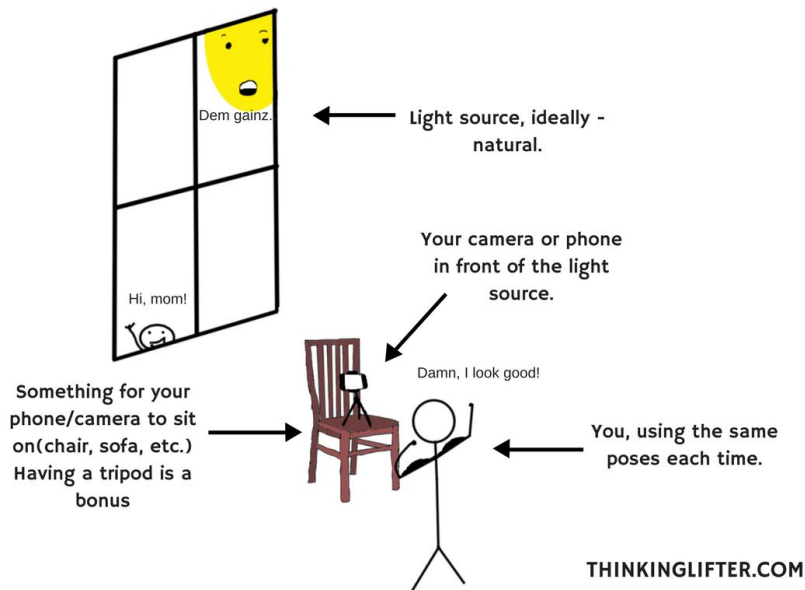
Next to tracking your average weight on a week to week basis, taking the occasional progress pictures is a great way to see changes.

We see ourselves in the mirror every day and changes can be difficult to notice sometimes.

But to make progress pictures effective, you need to take them under the same conditions every time and use the same poses.

Take progress pictures once every 3 or 4 weeks and compare.

PROGRESS PICTURES 101



#3: Performance in the Gym

Once you have a good idea of how your body is changing over time thanks to body weight averages and progress pictures, the next most important thing to track is your performance in the gym.

Whether you're using a workout log, an app, or something else, it's important to write down your workouts and track them over time.

Ideally, you should be able to see some improvements every few weeks.

Here's how I track my workouts:

I use an app called [Evernote](#). I've created separate notes that represent each individual workout.

On top of each note, I write the focus of my workout (eg. deadlift session, squat session, etc.) and the date.

On workouts where I do bodyweight movements (such as pull-ups, dips, etc.) I also write my morning weigh-in.

Below that, I have listed each exercise alongside with the number of sets and reps that I do. On the compound lifts, I also record my rate of perceived exertion (RPE) and whether I'm wearing a belt or not (for the squat and deadlift).

Say for example, in week 1 I do 135kg./300lbs. on the squat for 2 sets of 8 reps (with a belt) at an RPE of 9. If on week two I do the same weight for the same reps, but with an RPE of 8, then I'm making progress.

Once the training week is done, I sit down for about 15 minutes and write down each workout in my notebook.



Workout 1

📖 First Notebook



19.11(Workout 1, Bench):

Flat bench press: 4 sets w/ 100 kg x 8 8 8 8 -
@ RPE: 5 5 5 5 (5-7)

Close-grip bench press: 4 sets w/ 92.5 kg x 8
8 8 8 - @ RPE: 5 5 5 6 (5-7)

Incl. DB press: 3 sets w/ 35 kg x 7 7 7 - @
RPE: 5 5 5 (5-7)

Unilat. DB lateral raises: 3 sets w/ 12.5 kg x
15 15 16 (12-20) - @ RPE: 7 7 8 (5-8)



Then, I revisit each note, change the date, change the weights I'll be using for certain exercises and I'm done.

Evernote is very handy because all I have to do is write my full workout once. After that, all I have to change is the weight I'm using, the repetitions I'm doing, and the RPEs.

I also add small side notes to some workouts. For example, if I don't get a good night's sleep and my performance is down, I note it. Or if my grip starts to fail me on the deadlift, I make a note and leave it for the upcoming week.

When I see it, I can either use chalk, a mixed grip or work on [improving my grip strength](#).

Or, you can also get a [Moleskine Notebook](#) and write in each workout there as it happens. The downside is, if you prefer to pre-populate your workout, it can get messy to make changes later.

With Evernote, you can rewrite whatever you choose.

Some Final Thoughts and Anticipated Questions

Before we wrap up this guide, I'd like to write a few more thoughts and answer some questions.

1. When should I stop the bulk and move to a cutting phase?

You can go about that in 2 main ways:

When you've reached an upper limit on your body fat percentage or stomach measurements. If you set an upper limit of your body fat percentage at around 15-17%, you'll look pretty decent as long as you have some muscle mass.

The only downside is, estimating your body fat percentage can be difficult.

You can also go with an upper limit of your stomach circumference. For example, if at the end of your last bulk you felt that you were starting to get fat at around 85-86 cm., you can put a cap at 87-88 cm. this time (to account for lower back, oblique and ab muscle thickening).

Aside from that, you can also stop the bulk if you want to get lean for the summer, a photoshoot, etc. But that would be individual.

2. Should I eat protein before bed?

It used to be common belief that you need to eat food every few hours to prevent muscle loss, speed up metabolism, etc.

Today, we know better and there's much more research at our disposal. As long as you eat enough protein every day, whether you eat some of it before bed or not won't make much of a difference.

Eating protein before bed isn't necessary and you won't shrivel down if you don't consume that late-night cottage cheese bowl.

But, if you do want to eat some protein before bed to help with satiety and possibly with muscle growth, eat a slower-digesting one, such as:

- Casein protein
- Eggs
- Cottage cheese
- Greek yogurt

3. Does meal frequency matter in the grand scheme of things?

How often you eat each meal will be individual and there's no one answer. For example, if you're having trouble eating enough food, eating 2 gigantic meals won't do much good for you.

But, if you're struggling with hunger, experimenting with 2 huge meals and intermittent fasting can help. Also, if you work and can't get an afternoon snack in, eat 3 square meals per day and don't think much of it.

Bottom line?

Eat as often as your schedule allows you and the frequency that allows you to stay consistent with your calories and not over/undereat.

4. I'm skinny fat. Should I cut or bulk first?

Read [this](#).

5. Is eating 0.8-1g of protein per pound of weight healthy and safe?

As long as you have healthy kidneys, there's no reason to worry. Read [this](#).

6. Should I do cardio during a bulk? I heard that it stops muscle growth.

Yes, you should. Read [this](#).

7. Do you recommend any supplements for muscle growth?

Two are worth exploring in our context:

- [Creatine monohydrate](#)

- Protein powder - it is a convenient way to eat enough protein every day.

8. Can I do a recomposition (build muscle and lose fat) instead of a bulk?

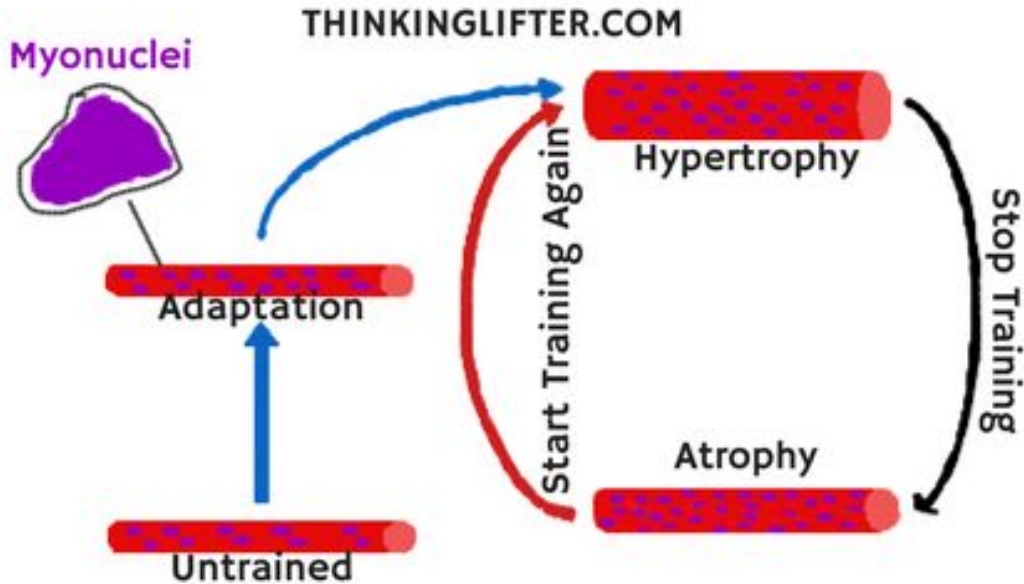
Body recomposition definitely is possible, but there are limitations to it. For you to be able to make a meaningful recomposition, you need to fall within one of 4 categories:

- **Beginner lifter.** Because lifting weights is a novel stressor for beginners, they can (and in most cases should) follow a recomposition protocol. To do that, they need to be in a small caloric deficit (of 200-400/day), eat a high protein diet (1g/lb. bodyweight) and lift weights 3 to 4 days per week.
- **Detrained lifter.** Experienced lifters who haven't trained for months can also lose fat and build muscle simultaneously thanks to muscle memory.

This is because training a given muscle accumulates myonuclei cells.

Once you stop training the muscle, it atrophies. But the myonuclei cells stick around and make it much easier for the muscle to grow back to its previous size once training is resumed.

During the regrowth phase, you can lose fat and build muscle simultaneously.



- **Very overweight or obese people.** Having lots of energy stored as fat will make it easier for you to follow a recomposition protocol. This is mainly thanks to your body's ability to use fat stores as energy to help repair and grow muscle while you are eating in a caloric deficit.
- **People on steroids.** It's no secret to anyone that steroids can speed up muscle growth and fat loss. The case is no different for body recomposition.

Steroids help the muscle accumulate myonuclei much quicker which drives faster muscle growth. Being in a caloric deficit does slow down the process, but it doesn't stop it.

If you don't fall in one of the 4 categories, a better way to gradually improve your body composition is to focus on one goal at a time. Have dedicated periods of muscle growth and fat loss separated in time.

