



Should You Bulk or Cut?

by

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“Should I bulk or cut?” is possibly the most common question on people’s minds. Coincidentally, it’s also one of the most important questions because no amount of knowledge or practical experience is going to do you any good if you don’t know where to direct your efforts in the first place.

It seems cut and dry, but it’s one of the most nuanced questions you can find yourself asking.

After all, if the answer were that simple, we would all know what to do, and when. But given the popularity of this very question, it doesn’t seem to be the case.

“Bulk if you’re at low body fat, cut if you’re at high body fat.”

Ah, it feels so simple. But it isn’t. The choice you make depends (or, at least, it should) on more than just your current body composition.

The fact is, there are very few situations where one answer would be the single best solution. In most cases, we have to consider numerous factors before we can conclude.

For example, if you had to direct an overweight or obese beginner down a productive fitness path, the idea of a fat loss phase would seem like a no-brainer, right? Well, not necessarily.

The fact is, merely putting such an individual on a well-structured training program could be enough to improve their insulin sensitivity, metabolic health, and hunger/satiety signals. This alone could help them achieve a degree of body recomposition (simultaneous muscle gain and fat loss) without strictly putting them in a caloric deficit.

And, once the newbie gains run their course, you can institute a degree of caloric restriction, where you were previously advising them to eat to satiety, get plenty of protein, and train consistently.

Another common example of a gray area are individuals who are commonly referred to as ‘skinny-fat.’ Those are people with little muscle on their frames, appear thin in clothes, but actually, have a higher body fat percentage.

In such a case, it would also be better to direct them to a solid training program, better nutrition (plenty of whole, nutritious foods), plenty of protein, and eating to fullness. In almost all cases, that alone (thanks to the power of newbie gains) is going to help them achieve body recomposition and build a solid foundation for future gains.

In both cases, the first thought of most people would be to put such individuals on a fat loss plan, but as you can see from the examples, there could be another, better solution.

How About Gaining and Cutting Past The Beginner Stage?

Surely body composition is the most important factor with intermediate and advanced lifters, right?

In many cases, yes. Folks with decent muscular development should primarily go about fat loss and muscle gain based on their body fat.

Now, it's worth going over the prevailing wisdom that if your body fat percentage is too high (too high often referred to as anything over 13-14% in the fitness industry, but still leaner than 90% of the human population), then your muscle-building efforts would be in vain because of lower testosterone and higher estrogen.

The idea is, high levels of body fat lead to the transformation of testosterone to estradiol (via the Aromatase enzyme) and worsen insulin sensitivity. Both factors allegedly disrupt calorie partitioning, hinder muscle gain, and instead lead to more fat gain.

There is some merit to the argument, but keep in mind that lifting weights changes the rules of the game. Your now active muscle tissue becomes much more insulin sensitive. The more you damage it through exercise and deplete its glycogen stores, the more likely it is for excess calories to feed the muscle rather than get stored as fat.

If this weren't the case, then some of the thickest guys out there wouldn't be the strongest and most muscular. Strongmen, super heavyweight powerlifters, sumo wrestlers, and, hell, even some professional bodybuilders in their off-season are all great examples of extremely jacked individuals with a lot of body fat.

This is not to say that you should bulk forever. No, it only means that you shouldn't be afraid to gain a bit of body fat for fear of missing out on those sweet gains. The more important factor here is how comfortable you feel in your skin. If you like the way you look, by all means, keep the gain train going. But, if you're not comfortable as is, then it would probably serve you better to lose fat first.

Now, with that said, most folks will likely do best with the typical guidelines of dieting and gaining - bulk to 15-20% as a guy (23-28% for girls) and cut back down to a level of decent leanness but not to a point where you're hungry and food-obsessed all the time. This makes for a perfect recipe to binge and regain a lot of fat.

Leaning down first will allow you to have a decent 'runway' to gain body fat and muscle before it's time to cut back down. It's best to be able to bulk for at least 3-4 months. Also, if you're a competitive powerlifter or bodybuilder, you should keep some limit to your gaining phases. You don't want to be too high over your stage or meet weight, because that would result in longer and more tedious cutting phases.

To Recap:

- Most beginners (overweight, obese, and skinny-fat) would be better off with a recomposition protocol in the initial few months of lifting.
- Getting too lean before a gaining phase (to the point of constant hunger and food obsession) can only lead to binges and re-gaining fat very fast.
- Past the beginner stage, level of fatness should be your primary determining factor of whether you should gain or cut. Not because of hindered muscle-building, but purely out of a health and appearance point of view. If you're not comfortable in your skin, consider losing fat first.
- Competitive athletes should avoid gaining too much over their competitive weight to avoid excessive dieting and water cuts.

Have any questions or comments? Feel free to drop me a few lines over at philip@thinkinglifter.com - I always reply. :)

You can also drop a comment at the bottom of the chronic dieting article - all feedback is welcome! Here's the link:

Calorie Deficit: How to Stop With the Chronic Dieting