Your Complete Guide to Reverse Dieting

Let’s talk Reverse Dieting, or the phase immediately following a prolonged caloric deficit in which the goal is to bring calories back up at a responsible pace. The key word to note is “responsible”, which often times is not the case, causing rapid weight gain because of a large surplus of calories while the metabolism is in a fragile/slowed state. For those who compete in physique competitions and are required to reach an elite level of conditioning with minimal body fat, the reverse diet can be harder than any part of prep. So why is that?

**Hunger**

 The first being hunger, obviously, as you are often required to go to extreme lows in caloric intake to achieve the leanness required, given the division. Additionally, the hormone Leptin is downregulated. Leptin is sometimes called the satiety hormone. It helps inhibit hunger and regulate energy balance, so the body does not trigger hunger responses when it does not need energy. However, when levels of the hormone fall, which happens when an individual loses weight, the lower levels can trigger huge increases in appetite and food cravings. This, in turn, can make weight loss more difficult. Because it comes from fat cells, leptin amounts are directly connected to an individual’s amount of body fat. If the individual adds body fat, leptin levels will increase. If an individual lowers body fat percentages, the body fat amounts will decrease as well.

Additionally, as Leptin and body fat levels lower, a hormone called Ghrelin increases. Ghrelin is also called the “hunger hormone”. The stomach makes ghrelin when it is empty. When it is released, it enters into the blood, and crosses the blood - brain barrier and end up in the hypothalamus, where it tells the brain you are hungry.

**Physical Exhaustion**

 On top of constant hunger nagging at you during the ends of prep and immediately following, your body is simply rundown. Contest prep requires a tremendous amount of time and effort from you, all while being restricted on energy intake, but also catering to the normal obligations of everyday life. These physical demands accumulate while crucial hormones like testosterone and thyroid hormones T3 and T4 plummet.

**Mental Exhaustion**

While both hunger and lack of energy are two physical effects that dieting has on the body, mentally, dieting is no easier. Often times after a show or prolonged caloric deficit for those just looking to lose weight, we feel a sense of entitlement when the diet is over.

So what do we do?

We reward ourselves that night, and the next night… and then it becomes “on Monday I’m getting back at it”, but Monday comes and you fall into the trap again! We mentally feel we have earned the right to stuff our faces for a while, but awhile turns into “too long”.

Why is this?

When dieting down for a show, you have one thing on your mind; the show. So when it comes and goes and you wake up the next morning, you have no sense of direction. So when this occurs, you become relaxed and get comfortable enjoying yourself. But as I sit here and type this out, I’m thinking, but are you wrong to do so? Is it wrong to reward yourself and enjoy your time “off?” I mean, hell, you just did a 12, 16, 20+ week prep, so yes it’s normal to do so and you should feel accomplished, because what you just did is not easy to do. The real issues arise when people take a step back and emotionally struggle to see themselves in the mirror as they become less lean. For what they worked so many months for, they feel they have thrown away in 3 short weeks.

Does this sound familiar to some of you?

So let’s see if I can help by giving you a game plan for your next reverse diet that will give you a goal and a focus, all while responsibly putting on weight at a healthy pace, allowing you to gradually shift into your off-season body composition, both physically and mentally.

**Factors that Should Be Considered When Setting Your Pace?**

This is a common question I get as a coach, how quickly should I be gaining weight and how much/long? As most answers for bodybuilding, the answer is “it depends.” Factors that can dictate your pace include:

Gender

Contest Weight

Division Competed In

Time from next Show

These variables should all be taken into consideration when planning out your reverse diet. Both gender and contest weight will dictate your pace by correlating to your starting point in the reverse diet. For example, a lower weight female bodybuilder will need to put on fewer pounds in a given time than a heavy weight male bodybuilder.

The division in which you compete in will also control the urgency to get to a higher body fat percentage. For a men’s physique and women’s bikini competitor, the level of conditioning doesn’t urgent a need to gain as much body fat immediately as does a men’s bodybuilder or a women’s physique competitor.

Finally, the time from your next show will play a crucial role in dictating how quickly you should gain weight. If you have plans to compete within the same year or even the following year, how fast and how far away you get from your contest weight will drastically differ from someone who plans on investing a larger segment of time to improving.

**The Game Plan:**

Now that we have covered the basics of what a reverse diet is, why it’s so hard, and factors that we must keep in mind when reverse dieting, let’s make a plan!

The first thing to understand is that while you look like an elite athlete, who is the epitome of health and fitness, your health is not ideal at a contest lean state. Hormones are down, energy is down, strength is down, metabolism is slow, hunger is high, stress is high, and the list goes on. It’s important to wrap your head around this concept and understand that gaining weight is NEEDED! The idea of goal setting is NEEDED, but your goal has to change. It’s no longer the goal to see the scale number drop or to see another vein or striation protrude. Your mentality has to change and it has to switch to seeing the scale go up as a good thing. This is way harder than anyone can explain for you first time competitors and often leads to poor relationships with food and self-esteem. So if you gain nothing from this article except one thing, it should be that gaining weight is NEEDED and that your self-worth is not dictated by your perfectly set abs!

**How Much Weight Do We Gain?**

Well respected nutrition coach and owner of 3DMJ, Alberto Nunez recommends an immediate “recovery phase” as the first phase of your reverse diet. It is his recommendation that this lasts for 4-8 weeks and that the individual should aim to put on 1.05-1.1% X contest weight back on. For a 185lb male, this would have him sit between 194-203lbs, while for a 120lb female, she would be sitting around 126-132lbs.

 What I like about this strategy that Alberto employs is that it conveniently standardizes an answer for all competitors. It also addresses the need to put on weight quickly with given parameters to where you should remain or begin to pull back on weight gain within a relatively short time frame. What I dislike about this strategy is the simple fact that it demands a lot mentally from competitors. Telling someone who weighs 120lbs that they need to put on 6-12lbs immediately after spending months to lose that amount is a very hard pill to swallow. That is why my recommendation would be to dampen the percent to 1.025-1.05% within the first month. This will be favorable both mentally and physically, while allowing for a large enough caloric increase to take place.

**What’s Next?**

Following your recovery phase that should last 1-2 months, it’s important to begin setting concrete goals for yourself. This is a great time to assess your progress, strategize ways to improve weak areas, plan the duration of your improvement season, and hone in on what you want to accomplish before stepping back on stage. Begin to mentally shift your focuses to strength gains in the gym, how you are feeling outside the gym, continue to develop healthy relationships with food, and continue to work up your caloric intake.

**Staying in Striking Distance:**

Now that we have the first few months plotted out for ourselves going into our off-season, let’s talk about how far we should exceed stage weight. The most important factor for deciding this is the length of time before you plan to begin contest prepping again. It’s important to note that this is the time until you BEGIN contest prepping, not stepping back on stage. Additionally, as everything else recommended in this article, these are what I recommend and should not be taken as fact, but opinion.

For those looking to begin contest prepping within 6-12 months, I recommend gaining no more than 8% of total body weight. For the 150lb person, this is 12lbs. For those looking to take 12-24 months off, 12-15% is a great range and for those taking 24+ months off, 15-18%. These weights are what I have seen anecdotally as well as seem practical to stay within striking distance and allowing around 1-1.5%/month of gaining.

**How to add in Calories:**

Adding in calories is something that cannot be given universal standards to best succeed, as everyone has personalized ending points of where they had to push their caloric intake as well as how sensitive their body is to different macronutrients. A good focus point to consider is to aim to return to maintenance as quickly as your body will allow you to do so. It’s important to realize though that your maintenance has changed from where it once was at the beginning of your prep. Reaching maintenance means matching caloric intake with caloric output, so if you are rapidly gaining weight, then you have surpassed maintenance and are in a surplus. Once you have reached maintenance caloric intake, you then can proceed to follow the guidelines above with considerations of the factors discussed!

One final note I will briefly touch on is, that the idea of an improvement season does not have to exclusively be weight gaining, but can consistent of multiple maintenance and even mini-cut phases. The goal of all off-seasons should be the same; to improve health and well-being while making consistent strides to improve your physique in a way that allows you to enjoy the process and promotes self-love. I hope this helps all of those who desperately seek direction after show day and as always I am free to discuss more on Healthost.com.