**Your Complete Guide to Carb Cycling**

Before diving into this monster of an article, I want to summarize the takeaway in one sentence:

**Creating the physique of your dreams does not require more than fundamentally smart hard work and consistency.**

With that being said, there are millions of tips, tricks, fads, and methods out there to lose weight or build muscle, but it’s important to know that understanding only a few fundamental physiological concepts is all you truly need.

The majority of what’s left is just patience and adherence.

In this article, we’re going to discuss all that is carb cycling and learn what it is, how it works, and how to do it. We will review many of the fundamentals that are the foundation of why this strategy is considered by so many as the best way to diet it, and ultimately, we’re going to answer the most important question: Is carb cycling better than traditional dieting? Let’s begin.

**What is Carb Cycling?**

Carb cycling is a method of dieting that involves scheduled increases and decreases in carbohydrate intake, often times in [caloric intake](https://legionathletics.com/how-many-calories-should-i-eat/) as well.

There are many different carb cycling protocols, but most commonly you will alternate between two or three types of days:

* **High-carb days**

High-carb days typically call for 2 to 2.5 grams of carbohydrate per pound of body weight and are usually your highest calorie days.

* **Low-carb days**

Low-carb days typically call for about 0.5 grams of carbohydrate per pound of body weight and are usually your second-highest calorie days.

* **No-carb days**

No-carb days typically call for less than 30 grams of carbohydrate. They are usually your lowest calorie days where carbohydrates come simply from green vegetables

If all that sounds complicated to you, that’s because, compared to traditional dieting strategies, it is! Carb Cycling requires you to be thorough with daily [meal planning](https://legionathletics.com/diet-meal-plans/) and consistent with hitting your macronutrients each day. While does any method of dieting, Carb Cycling requires you to establish multiple menus throughout the week that reach your macronutrient profiles each day as they vary throughout the week . Many people find this both physically and mentally taxing.

So, if Carb Cycling seems so complicated, why do people do it?

**The Nuts & Bolts of Carb Cycling?**

Carbs are the new generation’s easy target for blame on stalled fat-loss, rapid weight gain, and is portrayed as the enemy of the body according to the media! The reasoning goes as such:

Carbohydrates, while tasty, aid in fat storage by spiking insulin levels, which provide our body fat glucose to be stored! While at the same time, carbohydrates are needed to feed and recover muscles after strenuous activity!

Thus, an issue arises:

We need carbs if we want to [build muscle and strength as quickly as possible](https://legionathletics.com/how-to-gain-weight-fast/)…but we have to pay the price with not so lovely love handles.

Or do we?

This is where Carb Cycling is popularity becomes to shine as we’re told it can deliver most or all of carbs’ muscle-building benefits with little or none of its fat gain drawbacks. It accomplishes this rather astounding feat by using higher-calorie high-carb days to do several things:

* Replenish [glycogen](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glycogen) stores, thus enhancing training intensity.
* Optimize various hormones related to [muscle protein metabolism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Protein_metabolism) and [metabolism](http://www.muscleforlife.com/how-to-speed-up-metabolism/).
* Temporarily spike insulin levels to help preserve muscle tissue.

And by using lower-calorie low- and no-carb days to maximize fat burning.

Theoretically, then, this should allow us to build muscle while gaining little to no fat or, even better, [build muscle and lose fat at the same time](https://legionathletics.com/body-recomposition/). And now you understand why carb cycling is so popular these days. It sounds like a miracle. Unfortunately, though, upon closer inspection, it’s more a mirage.

**Is Carb Cycling Good for Weight Loss?**

Can you use carb cycling to lose weight? Absolutely. In fact, any dietary protocol that puts you in a calorie deficit over an extended period of time will result in weight loss, regardless of the foods you eat or how you structure your meals. In fact, as long as you regularly eat less energy (calories) than you burn, you’re going to lose weight. Mind blowing right? Sounds too good to be true, and in fact many people struggle to accept this fundamental concept. Can you blame them though? We are conditioned to believe that there are “good” foods and “bad” foods that we must categorize into tiny boxes of what we can and cannot have to look the way we want to look. That said, carb cycling isn’t sold as “just another way” to lose weight. It’s *THE* way to lose weight. The “secret” of the fitness elite and “best way to drop pounds fast.” And that’s when the truth of the diet begins to diminish.

To understand why, we have to first make a distinction between *weight* loss and *fat* loss.

When you diet to lose weight, a portion of the weight lost comes from fat, but a portion also comes from [water](https://legionathletics.com/water-retention/), [glycogen](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glycogen), and, in some cases, muscle.

Water and glycogen levels [will fluctuate up and down](http://www.muscleforlife.com/water-retention-and-weight-loss/) depending on your diet and a plethora of other factors, so we won’t focus on that. The real goal is to lose fat and not muscle. That’s what improves our [body composition](http://www.muscleforlife.com/body-composition/).

What does this have to do with carb cycling, you wonder?

Well, at its core, carb cycling is a carbohydrate-restricted diet, and while it may help you lose weight faster, it isn’t going to help you lose fat faster.

That is, if a traditional bodybuilding diet would have you eating, let’s say, 1,600 grams of carbohydrate per week, a carb cycling diet might reduce your intake at half that or less.

And while [low-carb diets](http://www.muscleforlife.com/low-carb-diet/) can, in the short term, beat out traditional diets in terms of weight loss (but not always), they don’t result in greater fat loss.

Yes, you read that right. Low-carb diets are not better for fat loss than their higher-carb counterparts. Sure, there are exceptions (certain metabolic disorders and extreme obesity, for example), but the above holds true for the vast majority of people.

**The Fear of Insulin**

One of the easiest ways to invent a fad diet is to isolate some aspect of eating and hang everything else on it. For the low-carb crowd, insulin is the scariest word in the dictionary; it’s an evil hormone designed to make us fat!

And the carbohydrate, we’re told, is insulin’s partner in crime. We eat delicious carbs, and BAM! A wave of insulin floods our bloodstream!

Well, like much of the nonsense pass off on us by [magazines](https://legionathletics.com/fitness-magazine/), trainers, and “[gurus](http://www.muscleforlife.com/fitness-guru/),” the “insulin makes us fat” story is nothing but an urban legend used to scare us. Simply put;

**Insulin doesn’t make you fat. Carbs don’t make you fat. Overeating does.**

To understand why this is, let’s briefly look at insulin and how it works.

Insulin is a hormone that shuttles nutrients from your blood to your cells. When you eat food, it gets broken down into various substances like amino acids, glucose, and fatty acids. These all make their way into your bloodstream, and are joined by insulin, which is produced by the pancreas. As the nutrients make their way into cells, your body gradually reduces insulin levels until everything is absorbed. Insulin then remains at a low, baseline level. This cycle occurs every time you eat food, and thus your body’s insulin levels are constantly rising and falling throughout the day. Now, when explained like that, insulin sounds like a blessing! [We can’t live without it](https://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/000305.htm). Why, then, are we told it makes us fat and sick? Well, because one of its roles in the body relates to fat storage, and that makes it an easy target.

Specifically, insulin [inhibits the breakdown of fat cells](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1083868/) and stimulates the creation of body fat. That is, it tells the body to…

1. **Stop burning fat and burn the energy readily available from the food you ate instead.**
2. **Store a portion of the energy that’s available as body fat.**

And yes, that sounds bad, which is why it’s an easy target and scapegoat. The “logic” goes like this:

*High-carb diet = high insulin levels = burn less fat and store more = get fatter and fatter*

*Low-carb diet = low insulin levels = burn more fat and store less = stay lean*

This sounds reasonable but is deeply flawed, mainly because it violates the principles of [energy balance](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/educational/wecan/healthy-weight-basics/balance.htm). Energy balance is the relationship between how much energy you eat and how much you burn. This relationship determines weight change over time and takes precedence over anything related to insulin or any other hormones. Simply put, you can’t gain a significant amount of fat without providing your body with a surplus of energy to store as fat. The takeaway is simple: if there’s an adequate calorie deficit, [carbohydrate intake](http://www.muscleforlife.com/how-many-carbs/) and insulin levels have little bearing on fat loss. So, now that you know why low-carb dieting doesn’t burn fat faster, you know the answer to the following question:

Does carb cycling help you lose fat faster?

The answer is no, of course, because eating fewer carbs on some days and more on others (and eating fewer in general) isn’t going to significantly impact your fat loss. The two factors that *are* going to are your protein intake and energy balance.

That said, this doesn’t necessarily mean you shouldn’t cycle your carbs when you want to lose weight. Some people’s bodies don’t process carbs well and [respond better to lower-carb dieting](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/15897479). You generally see this in people that are very overweight, and in these cases, carb cycling can serve them well. Another reason to carb cycle when you want to lose weight is because you like it. It might not offer any metabolic advantages but it doesn’t harm anything either, so if it’s going to help you keep adhere to your diet, that’s valuable.

**How to Carb Cycling**

Now that we’ve put carb cycling in perspective and adjusted your expectations to reality, let’s talk about how to actually do it. There are many different protocols, but I recommend you start with rotating between just two levels of carb intake:

* A high-carb day
* A low-carb day

You’ll often see regimens with a day of fewer than 30 grams of carbohydrate intake (no-carb days), but this makes compliance significantly harder in exchange for few practical benefits.

With that in place, let’s look at how to set everything up for both losing fat and building muscle.

**Carb Cycling for Fat Loss**

When you’re carb cycling to lose fat, you will have three low-carb days followed by one high-carb day. Where you place your high-carb day doesn’t matter much because it moves around week to week.

For example, here’s how I would do it:

*Day 1: Low-carb day*

*Day 2: Low-carb day*

*Day 3: Low-carb day*

*Day 4: High-carb day*

*Day 5: Low-carb day*

*Day 6: Low-carb day*

*Day 7: Low-carb day*

*Day 8: High-carb day*

Repeat.

Remember that when you’re carb cycling, you still have to [plan and track your calories and macros](http://www.muscleforlife.com/macronutrient-calculator/) if you want to guarantee results.

The starting point for determining where your food intake should be is your [total daily energy expenditure](http://www.muscleforlife.com/tdee-calculator/) (TDEE). An easy way to calculate your TDEE is to use a free online calculator or simply multiply your weight (in pounds) by 15. This should give a fairly accurate estimate.

Here’s how it breaks down:

* **On your low-carb days, aim for about a 25% deficit.**
* **On your high-carb days, aim for about a 10% deficit.**

For example, a 200lb male might have a TDEE at about 3,000 calories, so low-carb day’s calories would be around 2,250, and high-carb days would be around 2,700.

 3000 X 0.25 = 750 calories; 3000-750=2250

 3000 X 0.10 = 300 calories; 3000-300=2700

Let’s now look at how those calories translate into [macronutrients](https://legionathletics.com/flexible-dieting/).

* **Your protein intake should always remain at 1 gram per pound of body weight.**
* **On your high-carb days, get 50% of your calories from carbs.**
* **On your low-carb days, get 20% of your calories from carbs.**
* **Get the rest of your calories from fat**

Here’s how a **high-carb** day would look for a 200lb individual:

*200 grams of protein (1gX200lbs=200g)*

*338 grams of carbs (2700calsX0.5=1350 calories; 1350cals/4=338g) \*1g carbohydrate=4 calories*

*61 grams of fat (2700 calories-800 calories from protein- 1350 calories from carbs=500 calories; 500 calories/9= 61g fat) \*1g fat= 9 calories*

(For a total of about 2,700 calories.)

And **low-carb** days would look like this:

*200 grams of protein (1gx200lbs=200g)*

*115 grams of carbs (2300calsx0.2=460 calories; 460cals/4=115g)*

*115 grams of fat (2300cals-800 calories from protein-460 calories from carbs=1040; 1040 calories/9= 115 fat)*

(For a total of about 2,300 calories.)

Once you have your numbers worked out, simply [create a meal plan](https://legionathletics.com/diet-meal-plans/) for both days and stick to them, alternating according to the 3:1 pattern.

It’s that simple.

**Carb Cycling to Add Muscle or Maintaining**

If you want to use carb cycling to bulk or maintain your current [body composition](http://www.muscleforlife.com/body-composition/), you want to make a few changes to both your calories and macros.

First, I recommend a 3:2 low/high-carb ratio (every five-day cycle consists of three low-carb days and two high-carb days).

The low-carb days help [reduce water retention](https://legionathletics.com/water-retention/), making you look leaner, and the additional high-carb day helps with your training and muscle gain.

Your low- and high-carb days don’t have to be lined up in a row. Some people like to follow three low-carb days with two high-carb days, and others like to stagger them based on how they’re feeling in the gym, doing let’s say one high-carb day, one low-carb day, one high-carb day, and two low-carb days.

Schedule most of your high-carb days to fall on days that you are lifting weights and most of your low-carb days on days you’re not (although some of your training days will inevitably be on low-carb days).

In terms of working out your calories, here’s how to do it:

* **If you’re bulking, set your daily intake to 110% of your TDEE.**
* **If you’re maintaining, set your daily intake to 100% of your TDEE.**

And for the macros:

* **Your protein intake should always remain at 1 gram per pound of body weight.**
* **On your high-carb days, get 50% of your calories from carbs.**
* **On your low-carb days, get 25% of your calories from carbs.**
* **Get the rest of your calories from fat.**

Using the 200lb male as an example again, here’s a high-carb day for maintenance:

*200 grams of protein*

*375 grams of carbs*

*78 grams of fat*

(A total of about 3,000 calories.)

And a low-carb day:

*200 grams of protein*

*188 grams of carbs*

*161 grams of fat*

Finally, using the 200lb male as an example, here’s a high-carb day for bulking:

*200 grams of protein*

*413 grams of carbs*

*94 grams of fat*

(A total of about 3,300 calories.)

And a low-carb day:

*200 grams of protein*

*206 grams of carbs*

*186 grams of fat*

Again, once you have your numbers, all you have to do is create a [meal plan](https://legionathletics.com/diet-meal-plans/) and stick to it.

**The Bottom Line on Carb Cycling**

In many ways, carb cycling is like [intermittent fasting](https://legionathletics.com/intermittent-fasting/). Both are valid, workable dietary strategies that have been seized on and sensationalized by fitness “gurus” and marketers. Unfortunately, neither can deliver on many of the promises made, but that doesn’t mean they have no use. They just need to be undertaken with realistic expectations, and I hope this article helps in that regard. So, if you know that your body is particularly sensitive to carbs or if you just want to see how it will respond to carb cycling, give it ago. And if you do and don’t like how you feel or don’t see any benefits over traditional dieting, ditch it. **Remember that in many ways, the best diet is the one you can stick to.** For me, that’s a [flexible diet](https://legionathletics.com/flexible-dieting/) that entails eating every few hours but saving large portion of my daily calories for later at night, after I’m done working and I’m relaxing. For you, it might be carb cycling.