Bulking on a Budget

While half of the world complains about struggling to lose any weight and how they have to “starve” themselves to be skinny and fit, there is another half of us who would do anything to see the scale go up a few pounds! Yes, I’m talking to you hard gainers! The other half may look at you with distain as you tell the world, “I eat so much in a day and I can’t seem to gain weight”, but I understand your struggle! I was once there myself at a whopping 6’0 133lbs! So what did I do to pack on the mass without breaking the bank? I mean come on, I was a college kid working weekends at a restaurant. After paying rent, utilities, gas, and the occasional bar visit with friends, my grocery bill had to be underwhelming small in order to get by. I had big goals though and I knew there had to be a way to add size to my fragile frame, so I was determined make it work! Here’s what I learned worked best:

**Track your calories:**

One of the biggest trial and errors I learned throughout my own experience and now as a nutrition coach when I encounter clients struggling to gain weight is, we do not eat as much as we think we do. Maybe you or someone you know has said how much they eat and yet they struggle to gain weight, but do you do it consistently? It’s easy to slam down tons of calories one day, but for the next few days feel the effects of that and struggle to even eat 2000 calories. Or even if you do eat a large amount of sheer volume, are the calories high enough to reach the caloric surplus needed to add weight? Eating 8 meals of chicken, rice, and vegetables is great, but these sources are lean and require a great deal of volume to reach high amount of calories. I’m not advocating a diet straight from McDonalds, but what I am saying is to track your calories during periods of bulking up and see how many calories you really are consuming. Being aware is the first step to allow you to be more consistent with an amount that you can take in on a daily basis and not just one or two binges a week.

I recommend downloading a free calorie counting app like MyFitnessPal on your phone and gain insight on your daily intake as your first step to add quality size.

**Incorporate oils**

Alright hard gainers listen up because this a slick way to slide those calories sky high. Okay, puns set aside, incorporating cooking oils is an extremely easy and effective way to reach your calories when your food intake seems impossible to consume. A typical tablespoon of oil is roughly 14-16g of fat and 100+ calories. Be wary of the type of oils you use, as they not all equally beneficial to your health.

Saturated Fats: (solid at room temperature)

Butter, lard, shortening

Polyunsaturated Fats: (always in liquid form)

Canola oil, sunflower oil, walnut oil

Monounsaturated Fats: (liquid at room temperature, cloudy/semi-hard at cold temperatures)

Olive oil and peanut oils

Oils can be added to meats, vegetables, and even shakes to add a higher caloric density without the headache of having to slam down a higher volume of food. I recommend avoiding saturated fats as much as possible to avoid increased cholesterol and risks of heart disease. Stick to oils like extra virgin olive oil, canola oil, and coconut or walnut oil as they contain health benefits such as; antioxidants, omega 3&6’s, and can even increase testosterone levels!

**Increase caloric dense foods:**

As mentioned earlier, while eating only chicken, rice, and vegetables can be great, it also can be a stomach full to even get close to the amount of calories us hard gainers need to add weight! Try to increase your variety in food to choices that are more calorie dense/ounce. For example, try incorporating foods such as 85/15 ground beef, peanut butter, steak, whole milk, and pasta to bulk up your diet. Even utilizing foods such as Poptarts, bagels, and cereal can be useful, but I recommend utilizing an 80/20 rule when bulking up. 80% of your food sources should be from nutrient dense foods, while 20% can be from more fun foods such as the latter group mentioned. Remember, while we want to add weight, we don’t want to feel like crap!

Utilizing more fun foods following an intense resistance workout is a great time for those calories to properly be stored, while still not hindering growth and performance.

**Make friends with the blender:**

So you’re tracking your calories, started to incorporate oils on your meats and vegetables, and even have begun to swap out low calorie options with some heavy hitters, what’s next?! I’ll tell you what’s next; buy a blender! You can snag one from Walmart for $20 and it might just be your most valuable kitchen appliance after this! For those of us who have to eat 4000 calories a day just to see the scale move, know all too well just how much food that is! Instead of opting to buy “mass gainer” shakes that are often filled with nutrient void calories and sugars, start making shakes at home. Utilize ingredients such as; rolled oats, peanut butter, bananas, protein powder, whole milk, yogurt, cottage cheese, and even oils can really make getting those numbers a breeze. Don’t be scared to even throw in avocados or spinach in to increase your nutritional value of micronutrients—I promise you won’t even know they are there!

**Word to the Wise:**

While you may be eager to now stuff your face with all these wonderful calories, I do want to recommend that when pursuing your weight-gaining goals, it’s important to keep it controlled and in an overall moderate pace. While gaining 5lbs a week might sound enticing to the hardest of gainers, try for a 0.5-2lb steady weekly pace. Your body is tough, but you don’t have to look overweight to share similar health problems and risks that overweight individuals encounter. Dedicate periods of maintenance every 6-8 weeks for 4 weeks to allow your body a break. Enough of the warnings though, go get those goals!