

FAST FOOD FAT LOSS



Learn to love your favorite meals without a side order of guilt

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Disclaimer: Read This First!

I want to be clear here. I am **not** suggesting that you eat lots of fast food for the rest of your life. I ate a ton of fast food only to prove a point about what really matters when it comes to fat loss. I did this so I could share what I've learned in an attempt to reduce the overwhelming amount of guilt, shame, and anxiety that many people feel about their food choices.

If you struggle with those feelings, I do encourage you to replicate my experiment on a **very** small time scale to see what you discover about nutritional principles and how they apply to you as a unique individual.

To clarify, a "very small time scale" means **no more than one to two weeks**.

Finally, let me be incredibly clear again. While I have studied nutrition extensively for many years, **I am neither a doctor (M.D., D.O. etc.) nor a registered dietician (R.D.)**. If you have underlying health concerns or conditions like diabetes, hypertension, etc., **please speak to one of those professionals before undergoing any nutritional program, even a 7-day fast food fat loss experiment.**

Fast Food **Fat Loss**

See this photo?



In 2019, I made this **transformation** by eating fast food every single day for 19 weeks. No, really. For nearly five months, I ate almost entirely from McDonald's, Papa John's, Chick-Fil-A, Chipotle, and Wendy's. And I know what you're thinking: no, it wasn't all salads and grilled chicken sandwiches. We're talking Big Macs, pepperoni pizza, fried chicken tenders, and burritos. Some days, to prove a point to the "carbs and sugar are evil" crowd, I only ate donuts, ice cream, chips, and cookies.

Why the heck did I do this?

I did it because I'm sick and tired of people making you feel guilty about enjoying delicious food. As someone who makes his living helping others improve their health, I despise that you've been led to believe you must give up the foods you love. Has

anyone ever made you feel like a bad person or a failure for eating “unhealthy” foods? Well, that stops now.

I’m going to show you how to prove to yourself that there is no such thing as inherently “bad” food. I’ll prove to you that you don’t need to choose between liking what you eat and loving what you see in the mirror.

Why should you listen to me?

Because I’m not asking you to take my word for it: I want you to test it yourself.

Before we dive deeper, I want to address something. It’s true that as a fitness professional, part of my job is staying fit. I realize that some of you reading this might see the before and after photos and think something like, “Cool. An already in-shape guy ate a bunch of fast food and went from a 4-pack to a 6-pack. How does that help me?”

That’s a fair question.

It’s natural to think that maybe I’m somehow different or genetically lucky. Maybe you think that what I tried wouldn’t work for you. But none of that is true. My experiment was based on universally applicable nutritional principles that **anyone** can use.

In fact, my fast food experiment was partially inspired by Professor Mark Haub of Kansas State University. He’s the guy responsible for the famous “[Twinkie Diet](#)” that gained a bunch of media attention in 2010. To summarize, despite eating mostly Oreos, Twinkies, and Doritos for four months, Professor Haub lost nearly 30 pounds, reduced his BMI from “obese” to “normal,” and saw a significant **improvement** in his blood pressure and cholesterol levels.

Professor Haub’s Twinkie Diet is informative for multiple reasons. First, it shows that you don’t have to meet a traditional definition of “in good shape” to achieve

impressive results while eating “unhealthy” foods. Next, certain criticisms of his experiment reveal common misconceptions and cruelties in the nutrition world. One article condescendingly asked why anyone should take advice from an “obese nutrition professor.” It went on to incorrectly claim that because Professor Haub began with “high cholesterol and body fat,” his results could be disregarded. The author not only invalidated Professor Haub’s research based on his body, they implied his results could not reliably be replicated.

This toxic and elitist attitude is rampant in the fitness and nutrition industry. It contributes massively to anxiety and guilt around food choice despite being based on a fundamental misunderstanding of nutritional principles. Plus, it’s simply wrong to shame someone for enjoying “bad” foods. In reality, there is no such thing.

So, I decided to put my money where my mouth was and prove it. Interestingly, after I did replicate Professor Haub’s results, I had multiple people say that this only worked for me because I was already in good shape. Well, you can’t really disregard both, can you? The point is, what I did, but primarily what I learned, can work for anyone. Even you.



Learn to **love your favorite meals** without a side order of guilt

Sadly, millions of people have a severely dysfunctional relationship with food. There's so much contradictory nutritional information that it's impossible to know what to do with it. Luckily, you can disregard nearly all of it. How can I say such a thing? Well, it's because most nutritional information focuses on minor details to such a strong degree that it becomes more harmful than helpful.

Let me give you an example. The need to classify foods as "good" and "bad" or even "healthy" and "unhealthy" has gotten so out of hand that millions of people are now worried about eating fruit. Fruit! Have you been convinced to be nervous about how much fruit you eat because it's "high in sugar"?

If you do worry about this, don't feel bad at all! It's not your fault that the nutrition industry has successfully demonized an entire food group high in vitamins, minerals, water, and fiber. We need all of those things to survive and thrive, and most people don't get enough of them. This means fruit is about as nutritious as food can be, so we absolutely shouldn't be afraid of eating it. Fruit is just one example. I could go on about this kind of thing for much longer than you'd probably care to listen.

At the end of the day, I wrote this to combat the sheer volume of unhelpful nutritional information and restrictive diet plans that make you feel anxious, guilty, confused, and lacking control over an essential part of your life: eating. I wrote this because those restrictive diet plans are, simply put, wrong. The truth is, despite the overabundance of articles and influencers shaming us for not consuming enough Vitamin K or trying to sell us BCAAs (or whatever else is the current fad of the month), one outcome matters more than any other: maintaining your ideal weight and body fat percentage.



How do you figure out your ideal body fat percentage?

What “ideal body fat percentage” means will vary. It’s an incredibly personal decision that depends on a number of factors, like how much time and energy you can realistically spend on fitness. Personally, my ideal body fat percentage is around 12%. This level works for me, because I can participate in rigorous physical activities like soccer, rock climbing, and strength training without too much difficulty and without joint pain. At 12% body fat, I’m also comfortable with the way I look and my metabolic health markers are generally good. When it’s higher, I notice some negative side effects, but trying to keep it any lower is mentally and physically exhausting. Just like your ideal body fat percentage may be different, your reasons for wanting to achieve or maintain a certain level of body fat will likely be different as well. It’s nobody’s decision but your own.



To wrap up our discussion about body fat percentage, let's return to metabolic health markers. I underwent extensive blood work before and after my experiment, which showed that my cholesterol and blood pressure went down. This was after eating fast food every day for nearly five months. Keep that in mind as I share a bit of unintuitive truth for you. For weight loss, the type of food you eat does not matter nearly as much as you've been led to believe. As long as you aren't eating meals that

you know make you feel crummy, like a person with celiac disease consuming gluten, food choice mainly matters only to the degree that it helps you achieve and maintain your desired body fat percentage. My metabolic health markers looked good because I was in a body fat percentage range that was ideal for my body.

Ideally, my experiment should show you that it is 100% possible to reach your nutritional goals while still enjoying your favorite foods. If I could do it while eating entirely processed foods and takeout for nearly five months, you can certainly lose body fat (if that's your goal) while continuing to enjoy your weekly wings & beers night. Enjoying such things can take a little bit of planning in advance, but you can definitely do it. And it's worth it. Getting together with friends to enjoy delicious food is one of the many things that make life worth living.

The truth is, you don't have to feel guilty for eating a few slices of pizza. You shouldn't feel like a failure if you ate some ice cream while "on a diet." You can leave behind the anxiety you feel while constantly feeling forced to choose between enjoying the food you eat and liking the way you look in the mirror. You absolutely can have both.



Calories In vs. Calories Out...With a Huge Twist

How fast food makes accurately tracking your calories not totally suck.

I know what you may be thinking. Something like, "I've tried counting calories before and it didn't work." I hear you. In fact, this entire experiment was partially inspired by a long and thoroughly researched article from the Economist entitled, "Death of the Calorie." Its premise was that calorie counting fundamentally doesn't work. While that isn't true, I actually wholeheartedly agreed with the author that when using traditional methods, counting calories can be too difficult and imprecise to be practical.

However, the ironclad truth is, your body tracks your caloric intake perfectly. You cannot gain weight if you're in a caloric deficit and you cannot lose weight while in a caloric surplus. Neither has ever happened when measured under the intense scrutiny and precision of controlled metabolic ward studies. "Calories in vs. calories out" has been proven as close to a scientific fact as is humanly possible.

So, why do so many people think counting calories doesn't work? Why have so many people, perhaps even you, tried it and not seen success? It's because unfortunately, counting calories is incredibly difficult to do accurately and incredibly easy to mess up. There are tons of variables that determine how many calories you need in a given day. Further, most online calculators that estimate your caloric needs use formulas that vary greatly in accuracy. Put simply, it's not easy to know how many calories you need. Even worse, studies have consistently shown that people are incredibly bad at estimating their own caloric intake. It's common for people to report eating an average of 30% but as much as 45% fewer calories than they actually consumed! Even [professional nutritionists](#) are likely to significantly underestimate their caloric intakes.

I compare the way most people "track" calories to throwing darts in a pitch black room and hoping to hit a bullseye. They don't know how many calories they actually need and they don't know how many calories they're actually getting...no wonder success is so hard!

Knowing all of this, I decided to take the guesswork out of both the calories in and calories out portions of the equation.

For “calories out,” I tested my resting metabolic rate through a method called “indirect calorimetry.” The short explanation is that you put a clamp over your nose and then breathe through your mouth into a tube connected to a fancy machine. This device analyzes the carbon dioxide content of your exhalations and is able to determine what tiny fraction of a calorie you burn with each breath.

Fifteen minutes of breathing is enough for the machine to accurately estimate how many calories you burn in a day at rest. The machine then spits out this number, and you now know something called your Resting Metabolic Rate. Your Resting Metabolic Rate makes up roughly 65-80% of the calories you burn in a day, meaning it doesn’t account for calories burned through exercise, calories burned through non-exercise activity like walking and fidgeting, or calories burned through digestion.

This means that for most people, simply eating at the intake level of your Resting Metabolic Rate will lead to staying in a large enough caloric deficit to lose weight. Even so, I decided I would eat 10-20% **fewer** calories than that in order to guarantee, with as little doubt as possible, that I would be in a caloric deficit. Since my Resting Metabolic Rate was 2,635 calories, I needed to eat between 2,100 and 2,400 calories per day.

Admittedly, I burn more calories at rest than the average person. This is likely because I started the experiment at roughly 200 pounds and 15% body fat. With a 5’11” frame, this meant I had a larger amount of lean muscle mass than the average person. Because lean muscle mass is correlated with a faster metabolism, this explains why my metabolic rate was relatively high.



A Quick Shortcut

If fat loss is your goal but you don’t have access to a Resting Metabolic Rate test, the quick and easy solution is to multiply your desired weight by 12. That’s typically a caloric intake that will lead to fat loss for most people. For me, that would have been 2,160 calories (12 times 180 pounds). On the low end, but still right within the ballpark.

So, with “calories out” accounted for, what about “calories in?”

This is where the unorthodox decision to eat only fast food came into play. Fast food takes the guesswork out of counting calories. No cumbersome measuring cups, food scales, or inaccurate estimations. All I had to do was log on to each fast food company's website and take a look at their nutritional information.

You may have heard that in the United States, nutrition labels can legally be off by as much as twenty percent. This is slightly misleading, because in practice, a discrepancy usually takes the form of companies rounding their total calories down to the nearest ten, often due to a single unaccounted for gram of carbohydrate or fat. Further, there are fines levied when nutrition labels are found to be inaccurate, so it's not good business to flirt with the wiggle room the government allows. Fast food companies in particular have a strong incentive not to take advantage of this leeway. They're already battling perceptions of their food as "unhealthy," which makes millions of potential customers less likely to eat at their restaurants. The last thing these companies need is to be exposed as "legally lying" about their food's nutrition content.

As an additional deterrent, independent websites like calorieking.com and fatsecret.com verify fast food calorie counts by incinerating Big Macs and Whoppers to see how many calories these sandwiches actually contain. The point is, when McDonald's says a Big Mac contains 550 calories, you can be reasonably sure that it contains pretty darn close to 550 calories. Yes, perhaps the person who put yours together was a little heavy-handed with the Mac Sauce, so maybe this one actually contains 570 calories. However, that's still a way closer estimate than you can expect by eyeballing portion sizes of a home-cooked meal.



Planning the Perfect Fast Food Diet

Multiply your desired body weight by 12. That's your new calorie target.

Deciding to eat 10-20% fewer calories than my Resting Metabolic Rate meant I had to find meals that fit within a 2,100-2,400 "calorie budget." Once you know your calorie budget, you can do the same.

The next step is figuring out how many meals to eat, and when. After some experimentation, I discovered that I felt the least hungry if I ate two meals of 1,000-1,200 calories each, spaced 5-8 hours apart.

To further manage my hunger, I would typically drink a large black coffee or other caffeinated, zero-calorie beverage in the morning. I did this because caffeine has a mild appetite-suppressing effect. Then, I would eat my first meal around 11 a.m. and my second meal around 6 p.m. In between, I drank lots and lots of water. Proper hydration comes with the added benefit of reduced hunger, and I've probably never been better-hydrated than I was during these five months.

Below, you will find the three meals I consumed most regularly. I chose them again and again because they kept me full for hours, fit into my calorie budget, and didn't upset my stomach. Oh, and they're also delicious.



These meals were:

- **McDonald's: 1 Big Mac and 1 Quarter Pounder w/ Cheese**
(1,070 Calories, 55 grams of protein, 87 grams of carbs, 56 grams of fat)
- **Papa John's: 4 pieces of a Large "The Works" Pizza**
(1,320 Calories, 40 grams of protein, 156 grams of carbs, 44 grams of fat)
- **Chick-Fil-A: 1 Spicy Chicken Sandwich; 12 piece grilled nuggets; 2 Chick-Fil-A sauces and 1 Buffalo sauce**
(965 calories, 66 grams of protein, 62 grams of carbs, 52 grams of Fat)

I also routinely ate meals from Chipotle, Wendy's, SmashBurger, Bosa Donuts, and Popeye's. I even had days where I'd simply eat 10 donuts spread throughout 3 meals, or choose to eat half a tub of ice cream for one meal. Remember, I wanted to prove that sugar and carbs are not "poison" or "evil."

Throughout the experiment, I continued to build a list of meals that I enjoyed eating, that didn't upset my stomach, and that kept me full for long enough to be considered "worth it." You can learn to do the same exact thing. For me, these meals contained anywhere from 800-1,400 calories. Each day, I would simply pick two meals from this list and rotate them as often as I wanted.

Finally, in order to avoid slowing my metabolism by too much, I would also do the following:

- One day per week, I ate at "maintenance level," which for me was around 3,000 calories.
- One week per month, I ate at "maintenance level" for five to seven consecutive days.



Both of these practices helped keep my metabolism high while preventing the mental and physical burnout that results from being in a caloric deficit for too many weeks in a row. And this does happen. Your body doesn't like consuming less than it needs for a long period of time. That's why these "refeeds" were so important. They worked quite nicely,

because upon retesting my metabolism after the experiment, my Resting Metabolic Rate decreased by exactly 101 calories. Despite losing nearly 10% of my body weight, my metabolism decreased by only 3.8%.



How much did I have to work out to eat like this?

Don't hate me, but the answer is less than usual.

It's true. I actually **reduced** my typical week's worth of working out to account for my lower intake of calories. I knew that trying to work out as much as I normally did would be a recipe for fatigue, low energy, and even injury. I wasn't willing to risk that, so my typical week of working out during the experiment looked like this:

- 1 or 2 strength-training sessions of moderate intensity, lasting 45-60 minutes
- 1 or 2 sessions of indoor rock-climbing (bouldering), lasting 60-120 minutes
- 1 small-sided outdoor soccer game, lasting approximately 50 minutes

And, if I'm being honest with myself, I didn't train nearly as hard as I could have. I often only hit the lower end of the above ranges. There were plenty of weeks when I was only active on three days: one soccer game, one lifting session, one climbing session. Further, there was never a week where I lifted twice, climbed twice, and played soccer. Four days per week was the maximum I worked out.

Prior to beginning this experiment, I would typically strength train three to four times per week, climb one or two times per week, and complete one cardio-focused workout in addition to my weekly soccer game. As you can see, my activity level actually went down quite a bit.

It is true that my personal training job required me to be more active than a typical 9-5 office worker, but not as much as you might think. As a private trainer, my job was more to correct form and motivate **other** people to work hard. I was certainly not nearly as active as a spin instructor, a construction worker, or someone waiting tables in a restaurant.

The point I hope you take away is this: you don't have to work out like crazy in order to enjoy your favorite foods.

But... your cholesterol!

Remember, my metabolic health markers actually improved.

One of the things that most surprises people when they hear of this experiment is how my metabolic health markers looked after it was over. This is one area where my experiment differed from Dr. Haub's. I wanted to make sure I tested every possible blood marker that could potentially indicate a problem related to eating fast food for five months. Further, my metabolic health when I began this experiment was generally excellent, with most metrics in the optimal ranges. This meant I had a much higher likelihood of seeing these metrics worsen rather than improve due to the quality of the foods I would be eating.

So, what ended up happening? Well, at the risk of sounding like a BuzzFeed headline... are you ready to be shocked?

My total cholesterol went **down** from 194 to 183. An advanced lipid panel further analyzing my cholesterol found that my HDL, LDL, VLDL, particle size, and particle density metrics all either stayed within optimal ranges or improved. My blood pressure was basically identical, going from 110/70 to 112/67. Measures of my thyroid function, fasting insulin levels, HbA1c for insulin sensitivity, and CRP for general inflammation all stayed in the "optimal/excellent" range. Sorry, "Eating carbs will make you fat because insulin," crowd. I ate an average of 150-250 grams of carbs per day, sometimes more, with no ramifications for the way my body processes insulin.

To be fully transparent, my levels of Vitamin C and Vitamin D did decrease outside of the optimal ranges. This is unsurprising, due to the relatively low nutrient content of the food I was eating. This is also why this was an **experiment**, not a way I'd recommend someone eat for the rest of their life. Oddly, my levels of Vitamin A, E, and K actually all increased. My Vitamin B levels stayed the same.

Anyway, aside from the aforementioned decreases in Vitamins C & D, every marker of metabolic health either improved or stayed within the optimal range. Who would have guessed?

If you've only been skimming, read this section.

It contains the key takeaways and a quick and easy summary of how to do what I did on a smaller scale, plus why that will help you.

If you've been struggling while trying to lose fat, consider trying a "fast food only" experiment for only 1-2 weeks. The inherent goal isn't just to lose weight, though that definitely will happen if you follow the below guidelines. **The true goal is to discover for yourself that fat loss is possible despite eating "bad" foods. This will take the pressure off you by proving that in reality, there is no such thing as a "bad" food.**

Here's a quick and easy way for you to replicate my experiment.

- Determine your goal weight and multiply it by 12. Other than getting your Resting Metabolic Rate tested, this is the best way to figure out how many calories you need for fat loss. This is your new "daily calorie budget."
- Next, figure out how many times per day you'd like to eat.
- Then, take your daily calorie budget and divide it by the number of meals you want to eat. This is your "per meal" calorie budget.
- Drink only water, black coffee, green tea, diet soda, or other zero-calorie beverages.
- Weigh yourself every day during the experiment.

As an example, let's say you want to weigh 150 pounds and you want to eat 3 meals per day. You need 1,800 calories per day, and your "calorie budget" is 600 calories per meal.

Once you've calculated this for yourself, pull up the websites of your favorite fast food places and start to build meals that fit within 600 calories. This is where you

can start to experiment a bit. Maybe you prefer two smaller meals of 450 calories and one larger meal of 900 calories. As long as you stay within your daily calorie budget, it's completely up to you!

Finally, just a quick note on counting calories...please don't do it forever! It can suck the joy out of eating and out of life. It's best used as a temporary method to gain awareness around how much you eat in a given day.



A Quick Summary of Why This Experiment Worked

Aside from the obvious reason that I consistently stayed in a caloric deficit, my success in this experiment boiled down to utilizing a collection of skills. They mostly have to do with managing hunger and planning. They are:

- I ate only meals and didn't snack mindlessly.
- I practiced the skill of managing mild hunger. This meant I didn't let my hunger control me, and sometimes I had to simply be okay with feeling hungry for an hour before eating, or with going to bed while feeling slightly hungry.
- I stayed well-hydrated by drinking lots of water, but consumed very few liquid calories.
- I planned out my meals a day ahead of time.
- I paid attention to how long meals kept me full, and prioritized eating ones that were more satisfying.



All of these are skills that, when mastered, make it dramatically easier to reach your nutrition-based goals. In fact, I firmly believe that once you practice these five skills consistently enough that they become second nature, you'll basically feel in complete control of your body composition.

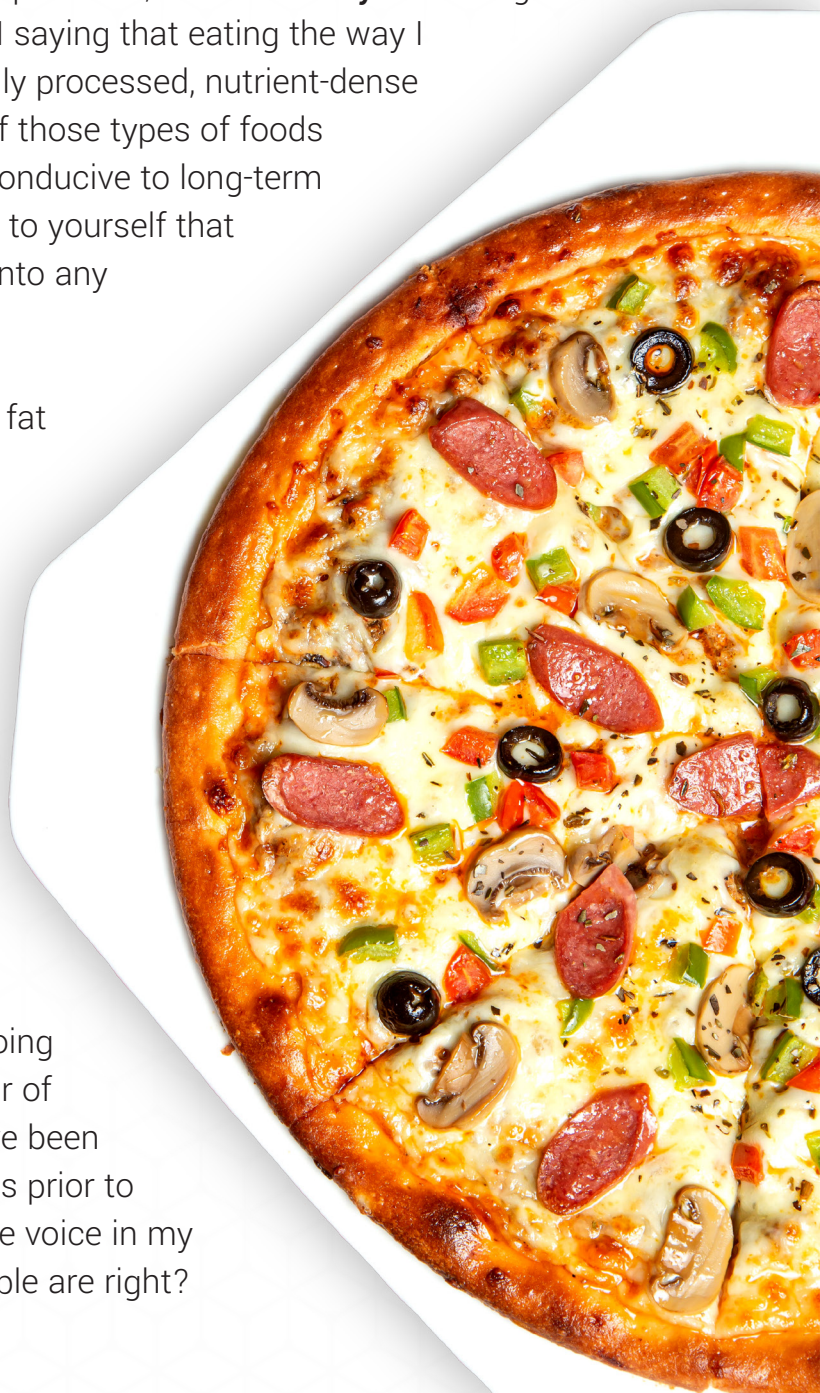
Why should you try this experiment?

If there's one thing I want you to take away from all this, it's not to let anyone make you feel guilty for enjoying your food.

You do not have to choose between liking what you eat and liking how you look. Don't get me wrong. Outside of a short experiment, I'm **absolutely** not telling you to eat fast food all the time. Nor am I saying that eating the way I did is "better" than eating whole, minimally processed, nutrient-dense foods. It's not. A diet consisting mainly of those types of foods is still overwhelmingly likely to be more conducive to long-term health. However, I do hope you can prove to yourself that it's possible to work your favorite treats into any nutritional plan.

I mean, I lost weight, decreased my body fat percentage, and improved or maintained vital metabolic health markers by eating nearly as "bad" a diet as you could design. But, like I said, don't just take my word for it. Try this experiment for two weeks and prove to yourself that it works. This will help you start to leave food anxiety behind. And this anxiety is very real.

Knowing what I did about nutritional principles, I was pretty darn sure I was going to lose body fat. However, it's an indicator of how thoroughly certain types of food have been demonized that I was **still** slightly nervous prior to starting this experiment. There was a little voice in my head that said, "What if the low-carb people are right?"



Maybe calories from chicken tenders and pizza do get immediately deposited into the fat cells on your love handles.”

Luckily, I’m happy to report that this little voice was 100% wrong. Even some minor concerns I had about eating this way leading to grumpiness, feeling sick to my stomach, or my skin worsening didn’t come to pass. Overall, I felt completely fine, my skin **improved** (likely due to maintaining low levels of general inflammation in the body), and my mood was unchanged. I was my normal, chipper self. Just ask my clients and my wife!

So remember all of this the next time you feel like a “failure” or a “bad person” for enjoying a delicious burger. You’re not, and it’s not the end of the world. In fact, once you prove this to yourself, you’ll start to overcome the guilt, shame, and anxiety you associate with eating. And once you leave those feelings behind, you’ll be so much happier and healthier. Eating is one of the best parts of living. We should all feel free to enjoy it.



About the Author

Greg Pignataro is a Certified Strength & Conditioning Specialist (CSCS), former Division-I soccer player (okay, benchwarmer), and unashamed lover of fast food. He is a PN-1 Certified Nutrition Coach and is one of fewer than 100 Athletic Truth Group-Endorsed Coaches. His work has been featured in over two dozen articles about strength training and nutrition from publications like SHAPE Magazine, MyFitnessPal, Livestrong, and Yahoo Health.

He lives in Phoenix, Arizona with his wonderful wife, Tess, and their two cats, Furiosa and Calliope. As of April 2021, he no longer has the man bun.

This photo shows that he, in fact, knows how to smile and doesn't skip leg day.



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