

Script – Print – How reverse dieting can boost your metabolism

Losing weight is hard. It can be a long process. But when you meet your weight loss goals, the feeling is euphoric. That is until you gain some or all of it back. That's where a concept called reverse dieting – a way to teach your metabolism by gradually adding calories back after a weight-loss journey – can help.

"Reverse dieting is used when you've been on an actual calorie-deficit diet for a while, and you're trying to get to middle ground, where you're no longer losing or gaining," says Nicole O'Neill, a registered dietitian with OSF HealthCare. "It's a way to determine how many calories you need to maintain."

The reverse dieting concept has been around for some time, but O'Neill says there was never a name for it. The premise is to add calories to your diet a little at a time after you've lost weight until you start to gain weight again.

"When you're trying to lose weight, there is a stop point you have with a goal weight in mind," O'Neill explains. "So, if your goal weight is 150 and you've hit your 150, you don't want to go to 130. So, you have to adjust something to stop that weight loss and be where you want to be. And inevitably, it's adding a bit more calories. And that's all the reverse dieting is – adding a bit more calories."

The way reverse dieting usually works is by adding back 50-100 calories each day. Often, you take the calorie load that you've been doing to lose weight and add 100 calories more. That doesn't mean eating a cookie; experts suggest the added calories come from protein or your favorite fruit or vegetable.

O'Neill suggests doing that for a week. Weigh yourself again and if your weight loss has stopped at that additional 100 calorie mark, that's your end point. Some people might require up to an additional 500 calories to reach their stop point.

Reverse dieting is very individualized, and it takes time, cautions O'Neill. It also takes effort to track your numbers. "I think it's a way to help you not have a regain," O'Neill says. "We want to achieve a goal weight. We want to maintain the goal weight. The reverse diet thought process helps you do that."

The biggest benefit is when you stop dieting, using a reverse diet to find your set point helps you maintain your weight instead of quickly regaining what you lost. O'Neill sees this often among her clients.

"They lose 60 pounds, they feel great, and then they're like, 'Ha, we're done,'" she says. "Well, a year later, they've gained it back, because they returned to what they were doing before the diet. So, this is a way to incrementally increase, to get them to maintenance without that regain of weight."

Reverse dieting is safe for anybody who's been on a calorie-deficit diet, according to O'Neill. For some, it might take one week to find that calorie amount. For others it could take a couple of months. Some people aren't going to be comfortable adding 100 calories to their daily intake. They'll start with only 50 calories, and so that elongates the amount of time that's necessary to get to their stop point.

O'Neill adds that what you eat on a reverse diet is a continuation of what you've been eating on your calorie-deficit diet. "Say you typically were going to eat 1,500 calories to lose weight and now you want to do 1,600 calories," she says. "You could add an extra hardboiled egg and an extra handful of carrots, and that's your 100 calories."

The best place to start is by figuring out how many calories you are currently consuming. If you need help, working with a dietitian is a good first step.