

Bulking: Adjusting Your Calories for Building Muscle

I think most people fit into the category of “I want to gain muscle, but I don’t want to gain a bunch of body fat.” With the exception of some power athletes who eat enough to feed a small village in a single day, most people can achieve minimal fat gain by adjusting their calories to a *slight surplus*. There’s also been an association with purposely gaining weight as being “unhealthy” (which it can be). No one wants to gain a bunch of weight and feel like garbage. Some people eat enormous amounts of junk during their “bulking” phases and thus gain a ton of excess fat. Further, it will be difficult to make the switch over to eating in a caloric deficit once you’re so acclimated to eating copious amounts of unhealthy (and oftentimes, delicious) food. That’s why, during the bulking phase, you should focus more on nutrient-dense foods.

So, bulking gets a bad rap for a reason, and people like myself tend to stay away from this phase. Since I’ve never really gone through a prolonged bulking phase myself—and I’m not a physique athlete nor do I aspire to be one—I can’t provide insight from my personal experience. However, let’s turn to the experts on this one.

There is a way to build muscle in a *healthy* way while minimizing the amount of fat gain. In a paper titled “Nutrition Recommendations for Bodybuilders in the Off Season,” Eric Helms and colleagues suggest **increasing calories about 10–20% from your maintenance calories** with a goal of gaining **0.25–5% of bodyweight per week**.

To determine your weekly weight gain and caloric intake goals, you’ll need your maintenance calories (which you calculated in chapter 6) and your current weight.

Step 1: Set Your Target Weight Range

Your weight \times 0.0025 = lower end of weekly weight gain

Your weight \times 0.005 = higher end of weekly weight gain

Example:

For my current weight of 139 lbs.:

139 lbs. \times 0.0025 = ~0.4

139 lbs. \times 0.005 = ~0.7

I’d aim to gain ~0.4-0.7 lbs. of body weight per week.

Step 2: Adjust Calories

Next, you adjust your calories to put yourself in a positive energy balance:

Your maintenance calories \times 10%

Your maintenance calories \times 20%

Example:

My maintenance calories of 2,234 (calculated earlier)

2,234 \times 10% = 223

2,234 \times 20% = 447

I’d want to eat in a caloric surplus of 223–447 calories per day.

Experts recommend that if you're newer to the strength training game and on the leaner side, you'll want to start at the higher end of this range, and if you're more advanced and already have a good amount of muscle mass, you'll want to aim for the lower range, which will help minimize body fat accumulation.

Now looking at these calculations, I'd want to aim for the lower end. Suppose I eat an additional 500 calories per day. In that case, that would amount to 3,500 calories per week, equivalent to about one pound of weight gain per week. I know my body well and will accumulate quite a bit of fat in the process. If I aim for 250 calories per week, that amounts to 0.5 pounds of weight gain per week, in which I will still gain a small amount of fat, but it's manageable.

For the lean bulking phase, it's best once again to experiment with your caloric intake and adjust as needed. If you're eating in a surplus without weight training, you're going to be gaining a lot of fat. How long you want to continue this phase is up to you. When you're happy with your muscle mass and no longer want to accumulate excess fat or are starting to feel uncomfortable with your size, it's best to start moving on to the *cutting phase*.