**Weight Loss Guidelines: Three Steps to Effective and Safe Weight Loss**

By S. Tzogas (Revised May 2011)

The goal of the following article is provide adult athletes guidelines to losing weight without compromising performance. The following steps to effective weight loss are not recommended practice for prepubescent or pubescent athletes.

Three important steps to consider prior to attempting to lose weight are:

1. **Determine Present Total Body Fat Percentage**

Determine total body fat percentage to confirm how much body fat can be lost. A certain amount of fat is necessary for normal functioning of the body. Five-7% body fat represents a good healthy minimum. Many champion international wrestlers test out at 8-10% body fat (Oppliger, 1997). Male athletes should not attempt to go below 5-7% body fat. Females should not drop below 14% fat (Walberg-Rankin, 1998).

Three common ways to determine your total body fat percentage are:

1. Electric: There are scales that can determine body fat percentage as well as weight.
2. Skinfold calipers: using calipers and the sum of 6 skin folds in a mathematical formula.
3. Hydrostatic under water weigh-in: weighing in a specialized scale under water.
4. **Gradually Lose Body Fat**

A modest reduction of about 500 Cal/day in total energy intake with an increase in aerobic activity is the best approach. The caloric reduction is achieved by substituting for foods that are lower in fat and energy than current choices. Athletes should consume more fruits and vegetables, which are loaded with important nutrients, but are low in calories. Weight loss, when necessary, should be gradual and should not exceed **1.5%** of the total body weight per week (Mirzaei,2009).

When attempting to burn fat it is very important to minimize the amount of carbohydrates been taken in.  Therefore eating lean proteins, lots of variety of vegetables and staying well hydrated is very important for the catabolic process to occur.  Athletes should consume only complex carbohydrates during this time.  Select fruits with the lowest amount sugar and calories for this short period of time only.  It is important to remind athletes that eliminating carbohydrates completely will be detrimental to their performance during practice.  Therefore be very selective with regards to the carbohydrates that they eat prior to training.  Complex carbohydrates with very little refined sugars in them should be the preference. It is important for athletes to take a good multivitamin and multimineral all year round.  The use of supplements such as creatine, anabolic products or any stimulants is discouraged. One to two days before weigh-ins it is important also to make sure that athletes are getting enough fiber in order to clean out the GI tract as much as possible. This is easily accomplished with lots of salads and bran cereals.   (Dr. Ivan Jagas, 2008)

It is strongly recommended that athletes check and record their weight before and after every practice. This routine is important for many reasons. It allows the athletes to know how much water weight they can loss in a practice, how well their diet is working, prevents having to cut too much weight at the last minute and it can also help to prevent overtraining. The use of weight loss supplements, laxatives and diuretics is not recommended.

1. **Avoid Excessive Dehydration**

**Greater than** **5% dehydration will compromise performance** (Oppliger). The practice of sweating off or “cutting weight” should not exceed 5% of the athlete’s hydrated weight. Not more than 1% of the athlete’s weight should be lost in a sauna or steam room.

The process of dehydration known as “cutting weight” usually involves a low intensity long duration aerobic workout. Another precaution that needs consideration is the fact that an athlete who is cutting weight needs to be in excellent physical shape. Athletes lacking optimal training can overtrain and in the process hinder their performance. Beware that any combination of supplements (such as creatine and ephedrine), medication, or a medical condition with excessive dehydration using extreme exposure to heat such as a sauna can lead to severe detrimental consequences.

Too much focus on weight loss can lead to less focus on learning to improve and in the process poor preparation for main events. Keep in mind that every athlete is different. Athletes respond differently to extreme exposures to heat and dehydration. Some have more tolerance than others. Athletes taking supplements or medications should consult a physician prior to any attempt to lose weight. Those athletes who have had experiences with eating disorders should not attempt to cut weight. Athletes cutting weight require supervision. **Losing weight is not an easy process.** **It takes great discipline and a lot of mental toughness. It is these two qualities in an athlete’s character that play the greatest role in making weight and performing well.**

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| **Review Questions:*** 1. **Explain what these numbers mean? 5-7%; 14%; 1.5%; 5%; 1%**
	2. **If an athlete weighs 200 lbs. and has 15% body fat, how much weight can he safely lose in 4 weeks?**
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