A Summary of the Zone Diet

The Zone diet, created by Dr. Barry Sears and promoted by Crossfit, is based on the idea that the correct balance of macronutrients (Protein, Carbohydrate, and Fat) you eat will create a hormonal response in your body that can lead you to optimal health. When your hormones are balanced, life in the Zone will mean freedom from hunger, better physical performance, and mental clarity all day! While doing Crossfit & the Zone diet, you will perform better, recover faster, get stronger, and have more fun when you hit those PRs and awesome WOD times!

The most important thing to know about the Zone diet is that every time you eat (every meal, every snack, every day) you should eat the right balance of Protein 30%, Carbohydrate 40%, and Fat 30%. This balance of macronutrients is the key to permanent weight loss and optimal health.

What is a block?
To make balancing meals simple, Dr. Sears has created a unit of measurement called a block. 1 Block of Protein = 7 grams of Protein; 1 Block of Carbs = 9 grams of Carbs, and 1 Block of Fat = 3 grams of Fat. The Zone Block list will help you plan out your meals, and you can find it in Crossfit Journal #21. Every time you eat, pick equal numbers of Protein, Carb, and Fat blocks for each meal or snack. For example, a 4 block meal will consist of 4 blocks of Protein, 4 blocks of Carbs, and 4 blocks of Fat. This will in turn equal the perfect ratio of 30% Protein, 40% Carbs, and 30% Fat. Remember, you are only as good hormonally as your last meal.

What are macronutrients?
Food can be divided into three groups of macronutrients: Protein, Carbohydrates and Fat. A little background about nutrition is needed to explain how and why the Zone diet works.

**Protein** - is the basis of all life, the main structural ingredient of all your body’s cells, and the enzymes that keep them running. Your body’s immune system, the integrity of your tissues, and the amount of your muscle mass all depend on having adequate levels of protein. Protein comes primarily from animal sources since it is more easily absorbed from meat than from vegetables. Your primary source of protein will consist of low-fat choices such as chicken, fish, egg whites, low-fat cottage cheese, tofu, and also isolated protein powders as opposed to bacon, steaks and sausages.

Protein also plays another critical hormonal role, it stimulates the release of the hormone called glucagon. Glucagon is a mobilization hormone that allows your body to use stored fat and carbohydrate as energy sources. Imagine Glucagon as a key that unlocks stored energy. Remember, Glucagon is only present in the absence of insulin, which we will talk about shortly.

**Carbohydrates** – the quick burning fuel source for our bodies, comes from plants and trees. Examples of carbohydrates include vegetables, fruits, and grains (the basis of all pastas, breads, and cereals). It is important to remember though, not all carbs are created equal. When you eat carbs, your blood sugar levels rise. This is very important because it is the combination of the amount of carbs you eat and the speed with which they enter the bloodstream that dictate how much insulin is produced.
Insulin (unlike glucagon) is a *storage hormone*. Its function is to push incoming calories into cells. Any excess carbs or protein that cannot be stored immediately are converted to fat by your body. Insulin will then drive this newly converted fat into your fat cells for storage.

**Controlling your Insulin** - The entry rate of carbohydrates into the bloodstream is called the Glycemic Index (GI). The lower the GI, the slower the rate of absorption and the less insulin your body will produce. Favorable carbs off the Zone block list will be fiber-rich vegetables and fruits with a low GI, and you can eat A LOT of them. Unfavorable carbs, like grains and starchy vegetables, have a high GI and therefore you should eat less of them.

Controlling the rate at which the carbs enter your bloodstream is the key to keeping your insulin levels low and accessing your stored body fat for fuel. *When insulin levels are too high, you are sending the hormonal message to your body - STORE FAT!* Not only do increased insulin levels tell the body to store fat, they also tell it not to release any body fat. This makes it impossible for you to use your own stored body fat for energy or lose any excess body fat.

The Zone diet is based on keeping glucagon and insulin balanced at every meal. This means maintaining the appropriate balance of Protein to Carbs at every meal.

**Fat** - the slow burning energy source, comes from both animal and plant sources. There are three types of fat: Saturated fat (which is solid at room temperature, such as butter), Monounsaturated fat (which is liquid at room temperature but solid in the freezer, like olive oil) and Polyunsaturated fat (which remains a liquid even when frozen, such as soy-bean oil). Eating fat will not make you fat, as long as it is the right kind.

Since all of your cells are composed of fat, the ratio of these types of fat in your diet will determine how effectively your body’s cell membranes function. There is a fluidity zone that allows membranes to operate at optimal efficiency, allowing your cells to access nutrients more easily. This is the reason why the Zone diet recommends the use of healthy monounsaturated fat, such as olive oil, canola oil, olives, macadamia nuts, and avocado. Hormonally, fat has no direct effect on insulin or glucagon, but it does affect their balance by slowing down the absorption rate of carbs into the bloodstream, thereby decreasing insulin production.

Furthermore, fat plays a critical role, because it provides the building blocks for the production of the most important hormones in your body, called **Eicosanoids**. Think of eicosanoids as *SUPER HORMONES* since they control all the hormonal responses in your body. There are both “good” and “bad” eicosanoids and their balance will determine whether your body works at peak efficiency or suffers from disease. As with insulin and glucagon, it is a matter of **BALANCE**. And what controls this balance? The ratio of insulin and glucagon in your bloodstream determines whether your body makes “good” or “bad” eicosanoids.

The Zone diet keeps all hormonal systems working smoothly by treating food with the same respect that you would treat a medicine. Taking food (medicine) at specific times per day and keeping the levels in your body constant with balanced meals.

*“Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food.”*  
— Hippocrates —

At first, you may think the Zone diet is not enough calories. Soon you will see, with your blood sugar levels stable, you are not as hungry as you used to be. As your body begins to access your stored body fat for energy with increased efficiency, you will not need to eat as many calories. Even a trained athlete
carries a minimum of 100,000 calories of stored body fat at any one time. The calories you need for your daily energy requirement is already stored in your body! *All you need to do is unlock the doors to stored energy; The Zone diet is your key!*

**In Summary** - The Zone diet is a low calorie diet with adequate protein, moderate carbs, and healthy essential fat - all balanced to be a hormonally correct diet that will send the right signals to keep your body functioning optimally! Are you ready to start?

**Making it Happen**
First you will need to calculate how much protein your body needs and how many blocks you should eat per day. Each person will have a different requirement of protein for their body based on their weight, percentage of body fat, and their level of physical activity. You can easily calculate this for yourself on the Zone website [http://zonediet.com/body-fat-calc](http://zonediet.com/body-fat-calc) OR you can choose the set amount of blocks based on your size and gender from the table in the Crossfit Journal #21. This table assumes you have a high activity level since you are a Crossfit athlete.

**If you fail to plan, you plan to fail**
Planning your dietary strategy is very important to your success. Consider what time you wake up and plan to eat within 1 hour of waking, then determine the times you will need to refuel your body by not allowing more than 5 hours to pass without eating a Zone meal or snack. To get the most benefits out of exercise, eat a Zone snack 30 minutes prior to working out and a Zone snack immediately after exercising.

**Rules of the Road to the Zone**
1) Know how much protein your body needs; Never consume more or less than required.
2) Every time you eat, make sure you eat an equal number of Protein, Carb and Fat blocks.
3) Spread your protein requirement throughout the day into 3 Zone meals and 2 Zone snacks.
4) Eat within 1 hour of waking up and never let more than 5 hours pass without eating a Zone meal or snack. The best time to eat is before you get hungry.
5) Make your Protein choices low fat.
6) Make your Carb choices from favorable carbohydrates (Fiber-rich vegetables and fruits).
7) Make your Fat choices from monounsaturated fat.
8) Try not to eat more than 500 calories at each meal and 100 calories at each snack.

**Other Helpful Hints:**
- Always drink an 8 ounce glass of water at every meal or snack. Try to reduce caffeine intake to zero as caffeine breakdown can increase insulin.
- If you're hungry and craving carbs, look to your most recent meal to see why. Were there too many carbs or unfavorable carbs at the last meal?
- If you make a mistake, do not panic. *Re-enter the Zone at your next meal.*
Living Life in the Zone
When you start a new eating strategy, social situations like going out to eat or traveling may be overwhelming at first. Here are some tricks to make life easier and keep you in the Zone.

The Eyeball Method
The two most important tools you have are your eyes and your hands!

1. Start with Protein using the palm of your hand as a guide. Your palm = 4 Blocks
2. Use your Protein amount on your plate to determine your Carb amount:
   a. If favorable carbs, make it twice as big as your protein.
   b. If unfavorable, make it the same size as your protein.
3. If you plan on having a dessert, cut back the amount of carbs on your plate.
4. Finally, add fat by having some salad dressing, olive oil, or eating a few olives or almonds.

Restaurant Eating
- Before going out, eat a Zone favorable snack so you are not starving when the waiter brings the bread basket. Always skip eating the bread at restaurants.
- Order a low-fat meal, and use the eyeball method depending on the amount of protein on your plate to determine how much carbs to eat.
- Remember, it doesn’t matter how much of each macronutrient the restaurant serves you... what matters is how much you actually eat!
- Want dessert? Cut back on your carbs and try to always split your dessert with someone.
- Want wine? Cut back your carbs even more.
- In general, treat alcohol like a carbohydrate. Whenever you consume it, always have 1 ounce of protein with your 4 ounce glass of wine or 6 ounces of light beer.

Taking Your Training to the Next Level
Are you ready to take your training to the next level? You have all the tools - now it is up to you. Why not give it a try?

We know you can do it!