Calorie Dense vs. Nutrient Dense

What does this even mean?

- These are terms used to compare the calorie to nutrient ratio in the foods we eat. Even though all foods contain nutrients, some foods are more beneficial to the body than others.

What does calorie dense mean?

- If a food is calorie dense, that usually means it is high in energy and low in nutrients. This means it is an EMPTY food. Consider these foods on the WHOA list. They are nutritionally poor food choices and contain much more calories than nutrients like vitamins and minerals.
- If the body does not use all of the energy that was consumed, it gets stored in the body as fat which could lead to weight gain, poor heart health, and onset of diabetes.
- These are typically highly processed foods which mean they are stripped of their nutrients and have added fat, sugar, and salt.

What does nutrient dense mean?

- Foods that have more nutritional value than calories are considered nutrient dense. These are great sources of good, lasting energy that will not be stored in the body as fat. Consider these foods on the GO list.
- Typically found in raw, whole-grain foods that could prevent weight gain, promote heart health, and reduce the chances of diabetes and cancer.
- They provide fewer calories and are high in Vitamins A, C, D, and E, calcium, iron, potassium, zinc, fiber, and healthy fats. They also provide protein and complex carbohydrates the body needs to stay healthy.

How do I know what foods fall into each category?

- Typically, calorie dense foods are going to be processed and/or packaged. Cakes, cookies, pies, candy, soda, fried food, and sugary drinks are just a few examples.
- Nutrient dense foods are going to be all raw fruits and vegetables, whole-grains, lean meats, nuts, and seeds.
- Check out the graphic below to get a better idea of where foods fall into place!

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Calorie Dense

Nutrient Dense

Empty calories

Low in calories and fat

High in vitamins and minerals

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EXTENSION