

WHEN SHOULD YOU SWITCH TO A LEAN GAINS PHASE?

How lean should you be?

Understand the hormonal environment and what to expect throughout a lean gains process to help you make the right decision!



When To Switch To Lean Gains

When should we switch from our fat loss phase to a lean gains phase? There is no fixed rule to this as there are a number of factors to consider and in this article I will cover each of those in order to help you make the best decision for you!

But first, a little clarification on the definition. Although we use the term lean gains, the process does not mean that we focus on growth whilst also getting leaner at the same time. The term is applied as an alternative to that of “bulking” which became associated with quickly adding weight with a lot less concern for the amount of body fat that was being added in the process. As a result, when many of us hear the term “bulking” we think of a process which entails adding lots of body fat and eating pretty much what you like as long as it is enough to see the scales going up. Lean gains refers to the process of growth whereby we want to do so in a way that we do not pile on excess body fat whilst we add the muscle. Some body fat however, will still be added throughout a lean gains phase and the amount will depend on the individual persons objectives, values and longterm goals as I will discuss shortly. It is important to remember that point as I know many in the past have thought some of my client transformation photos were shared following a lean gains phase due to the amount of muscle that a client may have added in their cutting phase, but if they are leaner in that after picture then it is showing a cutting phase and not a lean gains and it is possible, particularly when someone is suddenly doing everything right with how they train, eat and recover, that those clients manage to add muscle during a cutting phase.

I am also writing this for those who are not focusing on physique competitions as if you are a competitor, then whilst the information below will still be useful, there is a fundamental difference in that the goal is a particular look on one day and that day being the be all and end all. The focus therefore, does not consider other factors that may be important to you or I such as happiness with the look year round, commitments outside of training and finding a happiness with the balance between all aspects of life as for a competitor that happiness comes from that moment on stage and any sacrifices that need to be made to potentially improve that moment are made. With that said, here are the main factors to consider when deciding to switch to a lean gains phase:

1. How lean should you be?

2. What are your long-term objectives physique wise?
3. How long you have been in a fat loss phase for?
4. What brings you happiness with your physique?

How lean should you be?

Generally speaking, the leaner you are prior to starting a lean gains phase the better. As mentioned, whilst the amount one is prepared to add can vary, body fat will be added during a lean gains phase and therefore, the leaner you are before starting your lean gains phase then the more scope you will have to add body fat during it. For example, let's say you have reduced your body fat down to around 15% and are considering starting a lean gains phase at this point. If you have come down from 30-40% body fat or even higher consider the psychological aspect following this achievement; you may find you are very happy with how you look at 15% where you can now see your abs starting to come through, although perhaps now feel small after losing 20-30lb of body fat - perfectly normal! - and through those recent weeks have also really started to tire from the lower calories and are keen to be able to eat the extra food you would expect to have in your growth phase! This is very common, to someone who has just lost 20-30lb or even more to get to 15% body fat, that 15% body fat to that person is considered very lean and they may have spent what feels like forever working hard in nailing diet to ensure each week that body fat keeps coming off. Here though it is important to consider that the same 15% body fat to someone like myself would be the absolute limit of the body fat levels I would consider going up to and this presents a huge difference whereby one person is considering starting a lean gains phase at a body fat level where another would only reach at the end of their lean gains phase.

Lets say that we undertake a 16 week lean gains phase and add just 1lb per week and therefore we add 16lb of scale weight over the 16 weeks. If 3-4lb of that added weight is solid muscle tissue, then that is an extremely successful lean gains phase! 3-4lb does not sound a lot, but you would be surprised at the difference that makes on a lean physique and then of course the results of being consistent with your lean gains and fat loss phases, year after year, allows that muscle mass to add up more significantly!

If 4lb of that 16lb we have added then is muscle tissue that also means that we have added around 12lb of body fat in the process and now would need to enter another fat loss phase

to lose that 12lb of body fat whilst maintaining the added muscle mass. Consider the issue here one may have in starting a lean gains phase at 15% body fat. Within a few weeks of starting the lean gains phase they may already become unhappy with the few pounds of body fat added, they may after 8-12 weeks have lost a great deal of motivation, lost that happiness that came from seeing their body fat being reduced and feel desperate to switch back to cutting in order to feel how they did at 15% body fat. The operative term there being “feel” as it is the difference between that happiness that was felt in achieving the 15% body fat compared to how it feels at seeing it back up to 25% that now dictates their emotional state. This is something I will always warn clients about when they have lost a lot of body fat and wish to switch to a lean gains phase and why I will always try to get them as lean as possible prior to switching to a lean gains phase!

If you are around 15% body fat and are happy with how you look at that point then it would be better to see the 15% as an average body fat level. What I mean here is to continue dieting further, take another 8lb off that physique before starting the lean gains phase as that would mean you can add 8lb of body fat in the first 8 weeks of your lean gains phase taking you back up to 15% and still be happy with how you look. You then have the scope to continue going and perhaps add another 8lb over the next 8 weeks and then finish your lean gains phase without having spent its entirety with body fat levels in a place that makes you feel unhappy with your look. So, if the ideal look is around 15% body fat then starting a lean gains around 10% body fat and finishing it around 20% body fat would be a much more sensible approach.

What are your long-term objectives physique wise?

We would also want to consider the longer-term objectives when it comes to how much body fat we would allow ourselves to add. I have worked with many clients who are more like myself in that whilst adding muscle was always an objective, I did not want to spend a large portion of the year where I was not happy with my body fat levels and therefore, would be more cautious in my approach to lean gains whereby the target weight increases would be on the lower side, say 0.5lb to 1lb average increase per week. On the other hand I have worked with clients who are not so concerned about having clear abs most of the year round and are more keen to do what it takes to add more muscle. For those clients who are more prepared to add the extra body fat in order to optimise growth then may look to add 1-1.5lb per week so that, whilst they will add more body

fat during their lean gains process, they give themselves the chance of maximising the muscle mass which they can add too.

Personally, my own happiness came from sacrificing that potential growth just a little bit in order to ensure that I was always within a few weeks touching distance of being in shape to do a photoshoot. It would mean for myself that lean gains periods are shorter than may be optimal for growth as well as being implemented more cautiously so that the weight only went up in smaller increments week on week.

Our goal is usually going to be focused on being bigger and being as lean as possible and overtime as we add more muscle mass, continue the dietary approach offered by a fat loss phase and then increasing calories through our lean gains phases, we will find it easier to stay lean throughout. To show what I mean here I would, in my earliest lean gains phases see my abs disappear by the end of the lean gains phase, I could add say 8lb of body fat and that would be enough for that stomach definition to blur. However, after 15 years of training and adding muscle mass, not only were the food levels required on average much higher, but I would be finishing a lean gains phase at a body fat level that were more close to what I had been able to achieve at the end of my cutting phases early on than that of the end of the lean gains phases.

When you have spent years adding 40-50lb of muscle, it does become easier to keep the body fat levels down due to the energy expenditure demands of that muscle mass. It also means the skin has a larger surface area to be stretched across; when you add 8lb of body fat onto a frame of 200lb at 8% body fat it will look like a lot less body fat has been added than would be the case with that same 8lb added to a frame of 160lb at 8% body fat.

How long have you been in a fat loss phase for?

Although when the focus may have been on losing fat for a long period of time there may have been intermittent periods of resetting the metabolism and hormonal environment, when we are in a fat loss phase we are generally reducing calories and perhaps also increasing cardio throughout. The result of this process on the body is actually a deoptimising of the bodies environment for growth and for fat loss with testosterone levels gradually falling as calories go down, the thyroid levels falling and the maintenance calorie level becoming lower. Whilst this is all expected throughout any cutting phase, there may come a point where it is no-longer conducive to the

longer term results to continue pushing down the body fat. In situations like this you may notice the fat loss really slow and mood and energy levels really drop which are the result of those hormonal changes and a point may be reached where sustaining the attempt to reduce the body fat further only starts to have a greater and greater negative impact on muscle mass. A warning sign here will be noticing that your strength levels are no-longer progressing and then continuing further may even see the performance on your big lifts regress. Whilst in these situations it is sometimes better to then take a short break from focusing on fat loss and instead spend a 2-4 weeks pushing calories up just to reset the metabolism (see my article - Transitioning out of your cutting phase) before returning to the fat loss phase, if you have got relatively lean, lets say that 15% body fat and also mentally feel it is getting more and more challenging to do what is needed to sustain the fat loss progress, it may be a better option to start your lean gains phase there.

Whilst this goes against what I have mentioned earlier, it is why we do need to consider individual factors too when making the decision. For if someone has had to focus on fat loss for a long period of time to get to that 15% body fat then it would only be harmful to their long-term progress if they attempt to continue the fat loss phase but what is needed to keep progressing becomes too much for them to consistently adhere to then they could end up spending weeks and weeks fighting for little to no progress and in doing so will only further deoptimise that hormonal environment. This is a frequent occurrence when I work with a client who has had a lot of body fat to lose. We may decide to start their first lean gains at 15% body fat, but then to be very cautious in the approach and perhaps even throw in a few where they switch the focus to trim a few pounds of body fat back down during the lean gains phase. But the goal here would be as much to get the maintenance calorie level up which will happen during a lean gains phase as calories are gradually increased throughout as it is to actually add the muscle in the process. So whilst it may mean the lean gains phase takes that client back to 20-25% body fat, they can then start their second fat loss phase from there but with a much higher calorific baseline starting point. This means that it will be easier to burst past the previously achieved 15% in their second cutting phase before they are bottoming out on the calorie reductions and need to end the cutting phase. Therefore, that work that was needed to achieve 15% body fat the first time round, would now result in achieving 10% body fat. Combine this process with adding muscle too in each phase and it is how overtime you will be able to stay leaner throughout any future lean gains phases, ie starting from a sub 10% body fat level and still just about being able to see your abs

even at the end of a lean gains phase! There are countless clients I have worked with who do manage to look great year round now, but that is a result of putting in the work in previous years, where they saw through earlier lean gains phases which would see them have higher body fat levels throughout.

What makes you happy?

Of course this final point has also been covered throughout, but it is worth reiterating what any of us do this for - happiness and the way it makes us feel! If you are new to training and have a great desire to see more and more muscle mass then it can be worth adding some extra body fat early on so that you progress more quickly towards that goal. On the other hand, if you have just spent 20 weeks or longer losing 30-40lb or even more body fat and have thrived feeling and seeing the benefits of doing so, do you really want to start a lean gains phase at that 15% level you may have achieved only to see the body fat go back up week on week? As whilst you may be adding muscle in the process, visually you will only notice week on week the body fat level changes and may not enjoy seeing those levels creeping up after you have just managed to lose all that weight in the first place! I know it is hard! I know that when you have been working your ass off towards the end of a cutting phase that switching to a lean gains and the food or the thought of no cardio seem like the most amazing things in the world, but will you still be happy two weeks down the line? Will you still be happy a few months down the line? More often than not, it is worth pushing that body fat down further still, so that you can enjoy how you look not just at the end of your cutting phase, but throughout your lean gains phase too!