

Successful Diet Change for Better Health

So, it's the beginning of a new year. This is the time of year when so many of us decide that we'd like to make changes in our lives for better health, especially where our diets are concerned. But what does a healthy diet look like? How do you best implement changes to achieve meaningful improvements in health? With so much competing information, where do you start?

Healthy Diet

You're looking for a balanced, whole foods (as close to how it was grown or raised as possible), vegetable-heavy diet with as few chemicals as possible (pesticides/herbicides, additives, preservatives, colorings, etc.), and avoiding sugar whenever you can. Most of us have heard this before- shop the perimeter of the grocery store, and you're largely there. Rethink items that come in boxes or packaging, and always make sure you read the ingredient list- the fewer ingredients, the better (and make sure you can read/identify them). Ignore the trendy diets. Stick with well-portioned simple, clean, whole foods and you're going to be doing pretty well.

Implementing Change Successfully

Now that you have a general idea of the direction your diet should go in, how do you get it there? Change is hard, but if you're serious about improving your health, dietary changes are absolutely essential and totally worth the hassle! There are many different strategies to consider, but here are some that can help you be successful.

- **Change only one thing at a time.** If you try to do too much too fast, you're stacking the deck against yourself. You're at the beginning of a lifelong journey of better health, so don't rush. Despite this, the health improvements you seek will only happen when you make changes so don't get complacent and keep yourself accountable. This is definitely a marathon, not a sprint.
- **Add before you subtract.** Don't take the bad things out of your diet before you add some good stuff in. Still drinking soda? Keep drinking it (for now), but get your water in - ½ your body weight in ounces of water per day (20% will come from a whole foods diet). *Caution- this recommendation is not for those with cardiac or kidney issues- consult your doctor for guidance.* Once your water is there, cut back on the soda until it's eliminated. Love snacking on candy? Keep eating it, but you must also eat a vegetable/fruit and a protein with each snack. Once you've gotten the hang of your healthy snacks, start cutting back on the candy or at least swapping it out for healthier options like dark chocolate and dried fruit.
- **Make the commitment.** Let people know what you're doing. Enlist the help of a trusted family member or friend to be your support, and report to them your progress. Utilize websites like Stickk.com and set the stakes yourself and get yourself a referee to help motivate you to reach your goal. Keep a diet diary and refer to it at the end of each week. See where you succeeded and where you could improve next week.
- **Pay attention to your 'Eating Hygiene.'** Even if you eat amazing food, you have to digest and absorb the nutrition and you can't do that when you're eating too much, are rushed and distracted. Abandon family style serving and plate in the kitchen. Use smaller plates. NEVER eat in front of the television. Eat slowly- your gut registers what you're eating only after about 20 minutes, so slow way down. Chew your food thoroughly. Drink your water after the meal, not during.
- **Get the tools you need and learn how to use them.** You'll be cooking at home a lot more with a healthy diet, eating a lot more vegetables which you'll need to cut, so get the equipment you

need! It doesn't have to be expensive! You'll need a good [chef's knife](#) (and sharpener). Get a good size [cutting board](#). A blender. Maybe a simple food processor. Take a knife skills class!! It doesn't have to be expensive or intimidating- there are many cost effective [community opportunities](#) if you look. Cut your prep time way down and get those fresh vegetables in.

- **Set up your resources.** Source your food and your recipes. If you're on a budget, find the lowest priced, best ingredients you can. Consider a [CSA in your local farm, find your local farmer's market](#), [local food co-ops](#), look [online](#), wholesale clubs are carrying more and more organic foods, organize a group buy with your family/friends and buy in bulk. Many interest groups have member benefits that include access to buying clubs and group buys (like the [Holistic Moms Network](#)). Many stores like Whole Foods give discounts if you purchase by the case. Recipes are all over the [web](#), check your local library for cookbook options, set up a cookbook swap with your friends and family, many recipe [apps](#) are available for smart phones, get your friends to give you their favorite healthy recipes. The sky is the limit.
- **Plan ahead.** Set your meal plan for the week and shop in advance. Include snacks and [pre/post](#) workout foods. Be somewhat flexible in case the store doesn't have the ingredients you need and stock your pantry (perhaps like [this](#) or [this](#)) with essentials for when you're stuck. You'll be in a much better position to prepare healthy foods consistently and not succumb to the lure of takeout. Do some basic food prep in advance if you can- chop some veg, cook what you can in advance whenever you have time (on the weekend, earlier in the day, etc.). Plan meals that build on each other- make a great veggie filled pasta sauce one day, and use that sauce for something else later in the week. Pull that [slow cooker](#) out of storage and let it work for you (try [these](#)!). Always carry food with you- baggies of nuts and dried fruit, fresh fruit, etc. to keep your blood sugar level and avoid grabbing unhealthy snacks and takeout.
- **Pay attention to how you feel during and after eating.** Even if they're healthy foods, you may discover food sensitivities that can be major obstacles to achieving better health.
- **Know that you will 'fall off the wagon' now and again.** It happens and you need to learn from it and move on. Don't let those inevitable moments derail your whole plan. You were tired and took the easy way out with takeout. Thank the hands that grew and prepared the food and move on. Maybe you've already faltered in your New Year's resolution, but who cares. You're perfectionist self wants to start on the first of the month, or on a Monday of a given week, but you didn't. Get over it and move on. You're trying to improve your health for the rest of your life! Don't get hung up on silly details. Start now, and when you mess up pay attention to your triggers and try to avoid them in the future.
- **Reconsider your measurements of success.** If your motivation to change your diet is weight loss, don't let the scale be your only measurement of success. Even if you aren't focusing on weight loss, pay attention to your energy level, sleep quality, mood, digestion, bowel habits, focus, etc. These are very useful 'vital signs' that often have more to tell you about your overall health than those measured by your doctor. Even better, keep a record of them on your diet diary to really help pinpoint food sensitivities, what works for you and what doesn't.

A better diet is a great way to improve your overall health and wellbeing, and is well worth the effort. Food is absolutely our primary medicine and we have at least three opportunities every day to improve our health or work against ourselves. Not everything works for everyone, so always go back to being flexible and patient with yourself, but keep yourself accountable- things will only change when you change them. Stick to the basics and make sure you set yourself up for success. And no matter what, keep going!!