

So, You've Resolved to Eat Healthier in 2011. Now What?

Each year, countless Americans resolve to make eating healthy a priority. While many do it with the goal of losing weight, others understand that eating healthy can do more than just help you fit into your skinny jeans. Eating healthy can reduce your risk of illnesses such as heart disease, cancer and diabetes. It can also help improve your overall health by boosting energy, sharpening memory and stabilizing mood.

As you move forward with your commitment to healthier eating and, in turn, improved health in this New Year, consider these tips:

Simplify. Instead of being overly concerned with counting calories or measuring portion sizes, think of your diet in terms of color, freshness and variety. Focus on finding healthy foods you love and easy recipes that incorporate those foods.

Start slow. Rather than making lots of changes to your diet on day one, try integrating one or two changes each week. For example, let this be the week you begin having a green salad with dinner (light on the cheese and dressing, heavy on the fresh vegetables).

Be reasonable. Remember that maintaining a healthy diet doesn't mean you have to eat well all of the time. Allow yourself the occasional indulgence, so that you don't feel deprived and fall off the proverbial wagon.

Remember: Moderation is key. Serving sizes have ballooned in recent years, especially in restaurants. When dining out, choose an appetizer instead of an entrée, or share a meal with a friend. At home, use smaller plates and visual cues to control portion sizes. For example, your serving of meat, fish or chicken should be the size of the palm of your hand. Your salad dressing should be limited to one tablespoon (Pour it on top of your salad and then thoroughly cut your salad to spread the flavor throughout.).

Understand that how you eat matters. Slow down and think about food as nourishment rather than just something you gulp down in between meetings or while sitting in front of the computer/TV (another no, no!). And stop eating before you feel full. It actually takes a few minutes for your brain to tell your body that it has had enough food, so eat slowly.

Plan ahead. Whenever possible, prepare and eat your own food. Pick a few healthy recipes that you and your family like and build a meal schedule around them. If you have three or four meals planned per week, you'll be off to a great start. It's also a good idea to have an emergency dinner or two in the freezer for use as needed. This way, when life gets in the way, you'll be prepared.

Stock your kitchen with healthy recipe basics, including:

- Recipe and soup starters such as garlic, onions, carrots and celery;
- Fresh and dried herbs and spices;
- Healthy fats and oils for cooking, such as olive oil and canola oil;
- Fresh and/or frozen fruits and vegetables;
- Brown rice, white Basmati rice and whole wheat pasta;

- Salad fixings, such as lettuce, carrots, tomatoes, nuts and dried fruits;
- Beans such as lentils, black beans, chickpeas and kidney beans;
- Frozen fruit and berries to make desserts; and
- Unsalted nuts for snacking.

“One of the best things you can do for yourself is to eat a healthy, protein-packed breakfast each morning. It gets your metabolism going,” says Sarah Clark, registered dietician at Sturgis Hospital, “Eating smaller meals throughout the day can also help minimize cravings and keep your energy level up.”

Fill up on colorful fruits and vegetables. They are the foundation of a healthy diet and are packed with vitamins, minerals, antioxidants and fiber. Fruit and vegetables should be part of every meal and your first choice for a snack.

Eat more whole grains and healthy carbohydrates. In addition to being delicious and satisfying, whole grains are rich in phytochemicals and antioxidants, which help protect against coronary heart disease, certain cancers and diabetes. Try mixing grains as a first step to switching to whole grains. Avoid refined grains, such as breads, pastas and breakfast cereals that are not whole grain.

Enjoy healthy fats and avoid unhealthy fats. Healthy fats nourish your brain, heart, cells, hair, skin and nails. Foods rich in certain omega-3 fats (EPA and DHA) can also reduce your risk of cardiovascular disease and dementia.

“Healthy fats include monounsaturated fats from plant oils like canola oil, peanut oil and olive oil, as well as avocados, nuts and seeds,” says Clark. “Polyunsaturated fats, including Omega-3 and Omega-6 fatty acids, found in fatty fish like salmon, herring, mackerel, sardines and some cold water fish oil supplements, are good choices, too.

“It’s also important to reduce or eliminate consumption of saturated fats – such as those found in red meat and whole milk dairy products – and trans fats. Trans fats can be found in vegetable shortenings, fried foods and processed foods,” Clark adds.

Support bone health with calcium and vitamin D. These nutrients are essential for strong, healthy bones. Recommended calcium levels are 1000 mg per day, or 1200 mg if you are over age 50. Great sources of calcium include: low fat dairy products; dark green, leafy vegetables; and dried beans and legumes.

Limit sugar, salt and refined grains. It is okay to enjoy sweets in moderation, but try to cut down on sugar, as it causes energy ups and downs, and contributes to health problems like arthritis, diabetes, osteoporosis, headaches and depression. When possible, limit sodium to 2,300 mg per day, the equivalent to one teaspoon of salt. And avoid processed, packaged, restaurant and fast food. Processed foods like canned soups or frozen meals contain hidden sodium that quickly surpasses the recommended daily allowance.

“Two-thirds of Americans are either overweight or obese, and childhood obesity has tripled in the past three decades. Nearly 18 percent of adolescents are now obese, potentially facing a future of diabetes, heart disease and other ailments,” says Beth Buckley, Clinical Operations practice leader at Quorum Health Resources (QHR). “In addition to the health burdens associated with obesity, there is a considerable cost burden on both the individual and our nation’s healthcare providers. In fact, a major study published in 2009 found medical spending averages \$1,400 more a year for the obese than healthy-weight people.

Healthy eating and healthy living must become a priority for people of all ages.”

This article courtesy of Sturgis Hospital and Quorum Health Resources (QHR).

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