

# DIET RULES RECONSTRUCTED

Update how you eat using the latest in nutritional science, and reap the benefits

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**IF THERE'S ONE** message gut microbiome expert Professor Tim Spector wants you to hear, it's this: you are unique, and your body will respond to food in different ways to the next person.

You might be surprised at the lack of scientific evidence behind many widely accepted nutritional dogmas. Maybe you've come to accept that choosing a lower-fat option is always healthier. Scratch beneath the surface, though, and you'll discover that the reason it's so widely accepted isn't always a scientific one.

Relearning the fundamentals of food science gives you the power to decide what a good diet looks like for you. "We need to start re-educating ourselves about food rather than waiting for someone to tell us what to eat," says Tim. And education is at the heart of his latest book, *Spoon Fed*. In it, he uses the most up-to-date scientific research to dispel diet myths that have



developed over the years. "I wrote this book as a wake-up call," he says. So, if your diet could do with an overhaul, familiarise yourself with Tim's seven diet rules to construct a personalised meal plan that really puts your health front and centre.

# 1

## CONSIDER TIME-RESTRICTED EATING

**WE'VE ALL HEARD** the idea that eating breakfast first thing kick-starts our metabolism, but there is a lot of data that shows that going for longer periods without eating (between your evening meal the night before and the first meal the next day) can be a useful strategy for weight control. "Restricting eating to around



→ 10-12 hours in the day, with the remaining 12 or 14 hours fasted, can reduce insulin levels and help you lose weight,” explains Tim. “It also gives your gut microbes ‘rest’ time, which could be important for your gut health and immune system.”



Tim Spector is a professor of genetic epidemiology and author of *Spoon-Fed: Why Almost Everything We've Been Told About Food Is Wrong* (Jonathan Cape; £12.99).



**ACTION:** If you don't feel like eating breakfast sometimes, don't feel bad about it. But if you find missing it has a negative impact on your energy and mood, then it's an important meal for you. That doesn't mean that time-restricted eating is not an option. Try having your evening meal a little earlier and breakfast a little later. Aim for a fasting window of 12-14 hours – say, 8pm to 10am.

## 2

### EMBRACE GLUTEN'S BENEFITS (IF IT DOESN'T MAKE YOU ILL)

**WHEN YOU CUT** gluten from your diet, you're missing out on a number of important nutrients that are found in wheat, barley and rye. These grains are rich in fibre, iron, B vitamins and magnesium. Of course, if you have coeliac disease, wheat allergy or non-coeliac gluten sensitivity, then removing gluten from your diet is absolutely necessary. However, says Tim, “most people who think they are intolerant are not. Excluding an entire food group from your diet can reduce fibre and dietary diversity, which also affects our gut microbes, creating the possibility of long-term adverse effects.”

**ACTION:** If you can tolerate gluten and grains then there is no need to cut them out. Diversity is good for your gut, so try to include a wide variety of grains (and alternatives) in your diet: wholewheat and rye bread, freekeh, buckwheat, spelt, brown and wild rice, wholegrain pasta and pasta made from chickpeas or lentils, buckwheat, quinoa, bulgur wheat, and corn tortillas. Have oats for breakfast as porridge, muesli or granola. Snack on plain popcorn, oatcakes and nut butter, or rye crackers and houmous.

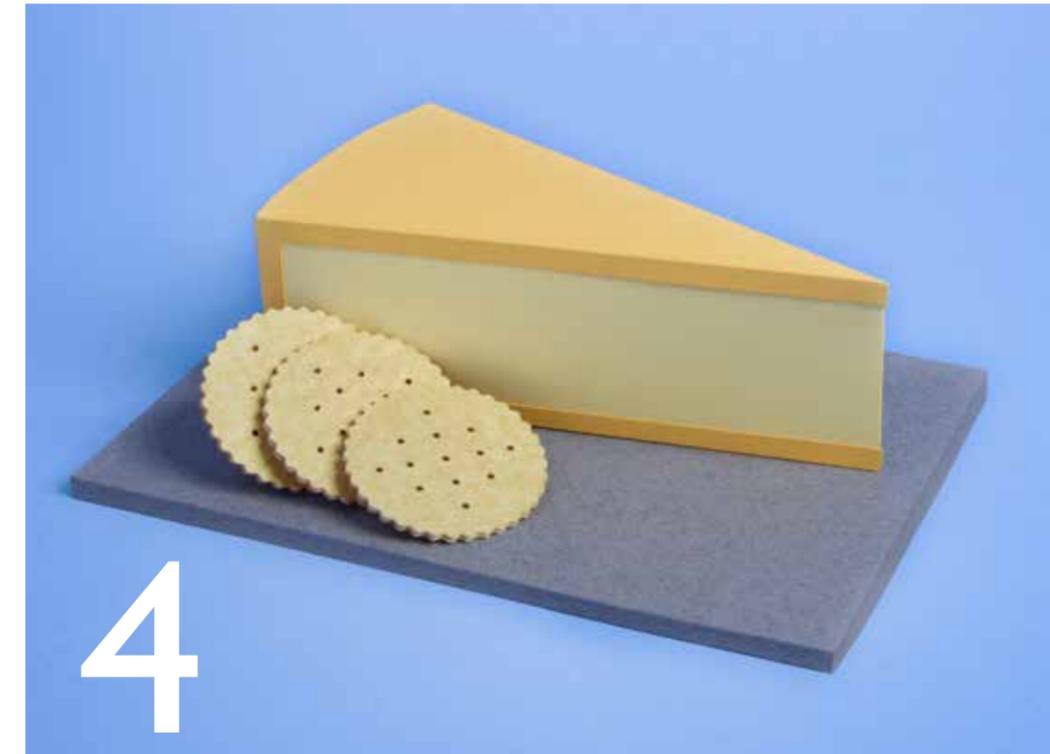


## 3

### EAT WITH YOUR SENSES, NOT BY NUMBERS

**YOU ALREADY KNOW** that cake has more calories than broccoli; there's no need to count them religiously. “Calorie counting is pointless for 99 per cent of people – you can't do it accurately, can't sustain it and studies show it has no benefit,” says Tim. “Focusing entirely on calories distracts you from looking at the quality of the food you are eating.” He notes that calories on food labels are based on science that is centuries out of date. To confuse things further, the number of calories you absorb from foods depends on how much fibre they contain, how they are cooked or processed, and the unique make-up of your gut microbes.

**ACTION:** Instead of counting every calorie you eat (or think you are eating), opt instead for wholefoods that appeal to your senses when you are shopping. Fresh food looks colourful, smells good and feels appetising, so focus on fruit, vegetables, wholegrains, beans, lentils, nuts and seeds, which are naturally high in fibre, are filling and satiate your appetite, so you automatically eat fewer calories overall. If you eat a healthy diet most of the time, your body will automatically find its balance – no calorie counting required.



## 4

### SUPPORT A HEALTHY DIET WITH THE RIGHT PROCESSED FOODS

**IF YOU ACTIVELY** avoid processed foods, it's no bad thing. But it's important you understand the distinction between processed and 'ultra-processed'. Crisps, sugary drinks, biscuits and processed meats are more accurately classified as 'ultra-processed'. Indulging in these foods once in a while won't harm you, but if you have them regularly, there's a good chance that they will

have a negative impact on your waistline and gut health. “Ultra-processed foods reduce microbial diversity, partly due to their very low fibre content but also because they contain emulsifiers and sweeteners, which cause our microbes to send out strange signals,” explains Tim. But certain foods, such as milk, cheese, and frozen and canned vegetables, benefit from processing, and not all of them are unhealthy.

**ACTION:** Choose the right processed foods and make them work for you. Frozen fruit and vegetables can be more nutritious than fresh versions because the nutrients are locked in straightaway and are less likely to be lost during storage and transport. Canned chickpeas, lentils and beans are a good source of protein and also contain fibre, which supports gut health and may help to lower cholesterol levels. Frozen fillets of fish are often cheaper than fresh versions and there are plenty of canned types, such as sardines, salmon and mackerel, that are a good source of omega-3 fatty acids.

### 'MILK AND CHEESE BENEFIT FROM PROCESSING'

## 5

## USE A VEGAN DIET TO BOOST VARIETY

→ **A VEGAN DIET** isn't inherently healthy – after all, you could be vegan and have chips, biscuits and cakes every day. “Just look at the popularity of vegan sausage rolls, which are incredibly processed,” observes Tim. “I have compared the gut health of individuals, and it's clear that how many plants you eat is more important than whether you are vegan.” It's not what you don't eat, it's what you put on your plate instead. We should all add more plants and diversity to our diet.

**ACTION:** A lot of us could benefit from eating more fruit and vegetables, and less meat and dairy. Try going vegan for just one day a week or two meals a day to reap some of the health benefits of this diet. Replace some or all of the meat in stir-fries, stews and curries with beans, chickpeas, lentils or tofu. For example, you can make chilli non carne with beans and mushrooms, or lasagne and spaghetti bolognese with lentils instead of mince.

## 6

## STOP RELYING ON EXERCISE AND PUT YOUR DIET FIRST

**IF YOUR GOAL** is weight management, be mindful of how you're approaching the balance of exercise and diet. “Exercise is good for many things, but it can make a lot of people hungrier, which can impact weight loss if they eat more as a result,” explains Tim. We often cancel out the calories we burned during exercise by eating more afterwards as a 'reward' or because our appetite increases. A single cake, for example,

could undo the calories burned in an hour's workout. It's also important that you remain active in your daily life (taking stairs instead of the lift), even if you're already fitting an exercise session into your day.

**ACTION:** Schedule your workout just before a main meal – this does away with the requirement for a post-workout snack. Log your food intake for a few days with an app such as MyFitnessPal (or just write it down), to keep track of the 'forgotten' snacks that may prevent weight loss.

## 7

## CHOOSE WHOLEFOODS OVER SUPPLEMENTS

**JUST BECAUSE** vitamins and minerals are good for us, it doesn't mean that consuming more of them in the form of supplements will improve our health. What's more, science in this area remains inconclusive, making their benefits unclear. Remember that a wholefood provides us not only with vitamins and minerals, but also other components that cannot be obtained from nutritional supplements, such as phytonutrients (chemical compounds in plants that confer health benefits) and fibre.

**ACTION:** There have been mixed messages about whether vitamin D reduces the likeliness of contracting coronavirus, as well as the impact if you do contract it. Some reports have indicated this is the case, but there is not currently enough evidence to support the findings. The NHS advises everybody to take a daily supplement of 10mcg of vitamin D to keep bones and muscles healthy. Most people should be able to get the rest of the nutrients their bodies need from a balanced, varied diet. If you're a vegan, you will need a vitamin B12 supplement – The Vegan Society recommends 10mcg per day. <sup>WPH</sup>

