

# 6 ways to EAT yourself HEALTHIER

Need a New Year diet boost – and a fresh way of thinking about food? Focus on what you CAN eat, not what you can't. It means you'll be happier and healthier, says *Good Housekeeping's* nutritionist Anita Bean



It's that time of year when we're bombarded with quick-fixes and miracle diets promising easy weight loss. They may be enticing, with promises of hope and happiness, but fad diets are impossible to maintain. Even if you lose weight initially, their long-term impact on your physical and mental health is often detrimental. Studies show that calorie restriction can lower your metabolic rate and elevate your appetite for up to a year, leading to a cycle of restriction and overeating. It's time to break that loop by switching your focus. Instead of counting calories and thinking about what to cut out, think about what to include, and see eating as an opportunity to nourish your mind and body.

## 1 EAT TO PLEASE YOUR GUT

Adopting a diet that is gut friendly will positively benefit almost every aspect of your body and brain. Our gut is home to trillions of microbes (our 'microbiome') that protect us from infections, make vitamins and neurotransmitters, and influence our appetite, mood and weight. The best way to nurture your gut microbes is to eat a diverse diet rich in fibre, fruit, vegetables, polyphenols and probiotics. These provide 'food' for them, enabling them to thrive and multiply. The more diverse your diet, the more diverse (which is good) your microbiome.

'Fibre is our microbes' favourite nutrient so aiming for 30g each day is a great way to keep them well fed,' explains registered dietitian Dr Megan Rossi (@theguthealthdoctor). But not all fibre is the same, so consuming a wide variety of plants is key. Megan recommends eating at least 30 different plant foods (beans, lentils, fruit, veg, whole grains, nuts and seeds) each week to increase the diversity of your gut microbiome. Simple tips are to count a minimum of three different types in each meal, don't eat the same lunch every day and include mixed seeds or nuts with breakfast.

## 2 INCLUDE MORE PLANT PROTEIN

'Protein-rich plant foods such as beans, peas, nuts, seeds, soy and lentils, are nutritious and packed with phytochemicals (plant nutrients) and fibre,' explains nutritionist Rhiannon Lambert, author of *Re-Nourish*. The World Cancer Research Fund recommends the consumption of foods 'mostly of plant origin' and inclusion of pulses at every meal. Beans and lentils have been shown to reduce levels of unhelpful LDL cholesterol in the blood, and their combination of protein and fibre will help you feel full and satisfied.

A diet rich in fibre, fruit and vegetables is key



But it is important to remember that many plant proteins do not contain a complete amino acid profile like animal proteins. Therefore, we should be mixing foods such as beans and brown rice to ensure we get all the essential amino acids (the building blocks of protein) that we need.

### PICK THE BEST PLANT PROTEINS

- ◆ **Chickpeas** There's about 9g in half a can plus significant amounts of iron, magnesium and fructooligosaccharides, a type of fibre that feeds the 'good' microbes in the gut
- ◆ **Chia and hemp seeds** Unlike other seeds, they contain all eight essential amino acids, making them 'complete' proteins. They're also excellent sources of alpha-linolenic acid, a type of omega-3 fat.
- ◆ **Tofu and tempeh** Made from soya bean curd, both are complete proteins and are rich in isoflavones, which have strong antioxidant and anti-inflammatory effects.
- ◆ **Quinoa and buckwheat** They contain one-and-a-half times more protein than pasta or rice, and are good sources of iron

and zinc, both important for the immune system.

◆ **Edamame beans** – these are young soya beans and excellent sources of protein and fibre, as well as phytochemicals that help lower blood cholesterol levels.

## 3 ADD MORE COLOUR

Eating colourful vegetables and fruits every day can have a significant impact on cutting your risk of illness. Each colour has a unique set of disease-fighting phytochemicals that confer big health benefits. For example, the deep red colour in tomatoes and watermelon is from lycopene, shown to lower the risk of certain cancers; the purple colour in blueberries and blackberries comes from anthocyanins, which may help reduce chronic inflammation, an underlying cause of many lifestyle-related

diseases like rheumatoid arthritis, dementia, heart disease, stroke and type 2 diabetes. Cruciferous vegetables such as broccoli and cabbage contain indoles and saponins, which have cancer-protective properties.

'I encourage my patients to get a "rainbow variety" of foods in their weekly diet as a way of ensuring a good collection of these different compounds,' says Dr Rupy Aujla, author of *The Doctor's Kitchen*. He suggests we include at least two different coloured vegetables at every meal time, vary them throughout the month and experiment with seasonal veg to make the most of what medicinal properties our food has to offer.

## 4 FIX YOUR EATING HOURS

Most of us eat soon after waking then graze throughout the day up to bedtime, meaning we're eating over a 16-hour period. But this pattern of eating doesn't sync with our body clock, or circadian rhythms, which some believe may put us at greater risk of obesity.



Researchers believe that aligning your eating to your body clock – shortening the window of time in which you consume your day’s food – could boost your overall health and potentially help you lose some fat. People have reported improved energy levels, better sleep and weight loss.

The theory is that our bodies are designed to digest and absorb food most efficiently during a relatively short period of each day; then repair itself and burn stored fat when we fast. ‘It’s not known at the moment whether there is an optimum window or how critical timing is. However, having less opportunity to eat does seem to lead to less food intake, even in those not consciously trying to lose weight,’ explains Dr Denise Robertson, researcher at the University of Surrey. Her pilot study in 2018 found that people who delayed their usual breakfast time by 90 minutes, and brought their usual dinner time forward by 90 minutes for 10 weeks lost more body fat than those who ate to whatever schedule they liked.

If you are new to time-restricted eating, start off eating within a 12-hour window – e.g. from 8am to 8pm. If you want to take it a step further, increase the fasting time to 14 or 16 hours, so you eat within a 10 or eight-hour window (e.g. 8am to 6pm, or 10am to 6pm).

## 5 STOP FEARING FATS

For so long it’s been ingrained in us to cut down on fat. Research has now shown that, while high in calories, not all fats are the enemy. The unsaturated fats, which include monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats are vital for

our body’s physical and mental health. Researchers advise eating more of these and less saturated fats. Monounsaturated fats, found in avocados, olive oil, nuts and seeds, help reduce the amount of LDL (bad) cholesterol and our overall risk of heart disease, high blood pressure and stroke. Omega-3-rich foods – oily fish, walnuts and flax, chia, hemp and pumpkin seeds – support brain performance and memory, and also influence behaviour and mood.

Some people perceive coconut oil to be healthy but the British Heart Foundation says it is more likely to raise levels of LDL cholesterol than lower them. A review of 55 studies on the effects of different oils on blood cholesterol found that vegetable oils such as rapeseed, flaxseed and olive oil to

be the best choice for lowering cholesterol. Coconut oil fared better than butter but seed oils, for example sunflower oil, won the day as the best ones for cooking your food in.

## 6 MANAGE YOUR ALCOHOL

Alcohol adds extra calories, makes you hungry, affects your sleep and can give you a sore head in the morning if you overdo it. There’s no denying that alcohol should be limited as part of a healthy diet. Annie Grace, author of *The Alcohol Experiment*, offers the following tips on how to manage your intake.

**1 Be mindful.** Pay attention to why you’re drinking. Are you filling an emotional or physical need? Hunger, stress? Being mindful of why leads to healthier choices.

**2 Stay hydrated.** You’re less likely to overdrink if you’re hydrated. Alcohol is a diuretic so you need to replace the fluid you’re losing. Replace it with water – not wine!

**3 Make decisions beforehand.** Establish boundaries before drinking. Alcohol leads to poor decisions. Knowing your terms before helps you maintain resolve.

**4 Plan something for the next day.** Avoid overdoing it by making morning plans. To honour your commitment, you’ll turn down just one more drink to turn in early instead.

**5 Question your beliefs.** Examine if your reasons for drinking are based in reality. Is that drink really relaxing? Are you having fun? Are you happy? Answer those and decide if alcohol is going to benefit you that night.



## HEALTHY OR HYPE? Find out if these trendy foods are worth adding to your diet...

- ◆ **SOURDOUGH BREAD** The dough is fermented before baking so has a lower content of phytate and gluten, making it more digestible for people who are sensitive to gluten.
- ◆ **PLANT-BASED MILKS** With the exception of soya, most plant-based milks are very low in protein. So, ignore the hype unless you can’t – or prefer not to – consume cow’s milk.
- ◆ **KEFIR** Similar to yogurt, this fermented milk drink is rich in probiotics that boost healthy gut bacteria and may ease lactose intolerance symptoms.

- ◆ **CACAO** Less processed than cocoa powder, contains more polyphenols, magnesium, iron and potassium but the difference is very small.
- ◆ **MATCHA** This powdered tea contains more polyphenols than normal green tea, but its cancer-fighting and fat-burning claims are unproven.
- ◆ **TURMERIC** It contains curcumin, which may help reduce inflammation and cancer risk, but levels in turmeric are extremely low (3%). □



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