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## Eat yourself healthier in a week

WANT MORE ENERGY, IMPROVED MOOD AND CLEARER SKIN? DIETITIAN JULIETTE KELLOW REVEALS THE CHANGES THAT WILL BRING BENEFITS IN SEVEN DAYS

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STARTING to eat a nutritious diet – and then sticking to it long term – is a proven way to stay healthy and lower our risk of health problems such as heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes and some cancers. But you don't have to have a complete overhaul to see an impact. Making just a few key changes to your eating habits can benefit both physical and mental health in as little as one week, from more sleep to fewer headaches and digestive complaints, and even an uptick in your mental wellbeing.



So with spring in the air, there's no better time to make dietary changes that will future-proof your health and start giving results in just seven days.

### SKIP SALT

Reducing our salt intake usually helps lower blood pressure within a few weeks, but new research suggests we could see benefits in as little as seven days. Research published in the British Medical Journal found that, in 50 to 75-year-old adults with a history of hypertension, cutting salt by one teaspoon a day reduced blood pressure by as much as taking medication. That's good news, as around half of all heart attacks and strokes are linked to high blood pressure, which affects 30% of UK adults. Around three-quarters of the salt in our diet comes from foods we buy such as bacon, ham, sauces, pickles, savoury snacks, bread, cheese, takeaways and pizzas – so, as well as skipping salt when cooking or at the table, check food labels on packaging to help select products with lower levels of it.

## KEEP REGULAR

Glucose – the simplest form of sugar – fuels all the cells and organs in our body, including the brain. That’s why we feel irritable, tired, dizzy and unable to concentrate when blood sugar (glucose) levels plummet due to skipping meals.

Our brain also lets us know when we need to top up blood sugar levels. Cue cravings for sugary foods like chocolate, sweets, biscuits and cakes. These rapidly increase blood sugar, providing a quick energy burst. But the effect is short lived. Levels drop just as quickly, resulting in low blood sugar and all the symptoms that come with it.

The solution is to eat regularly and focus on carb-rich foods that break down slowly, causing a steady release of sugar into the blood. It means swapping processed, refined carbs such as white rice, bread and pasta for higher-fibre brown rice, wholemeal bread, whole-wheat pasta, wholegrain cereals and oats.

## FAB FIBRE FOR GOOD GUTS

Most people in the UK fail to consume enough fibre, eating just two-thirds of the recommended 30g a day. But fibre fills us up, which helps curb hunger. It also moves food through our digestive system more quickly, helping to prevent constipation, which affects one in seven

UK adults, causing stomach cramps, bloating and nausea. Within just days of increasing fibre, our gut microbiome – home to trillions of microbes – also starts to benefit.

Fibre feeds the good bacteria, so they flourish, crowd out harmful bacteria and produce short-chain fatty acids such as butyrate, which may have many health benefits, including strengthening the gut wall and fighting inflammation. A four-week study led by King’s College, London, found eating two handfuls (56g) of almonds a day – which provides 7g fibre – increased butyrate levels and resulted in an extra 1.5 bowel movements a week. To boost fibre, enjoy a varied plant-based diet that’s packed with fruit, veg, pulses, nuts, seeds and wholegrains such as wholemeal bread, brown rice, wholewheat pasta and oats.

## RAISE A GLASS

Being even mildly dehydrated can affect concentration, energy levels and mood, and make headaches, constipation, and dry skin, lips and eyes more likely. The solution is – to the amount we need varies according to many things including our age, size, gender and how much we sweat. Checking the colour of urine is the best way to tell if we’re drinking enough. If it’s dark brown or orange, or we’re dehydrated and need to drink more. Water is the gold standard, but all fluids (except alcohol) help keep us hydrated. This includes tea, coffee, milk, juices, smoothies and soft drinks.

## DOWNSIZE YOUR DINNER

Eating big meals means our digestive system has to work overtime, which produces excess gas, leading to bloating and discomfort. Over-indulging (as well as rich meals and alcohol) can also cause indigestion, where excess stomach acid travels up towards the throat causing a painful burning feeling in the chest (heartburn), a bitter taste in the mouth, and nausea, belching and flatulence.

Eating large meals late in the evening can also hinder sleep as our digestive system goes into overdrive to process the food. To reduce portions, put a fifth less food on your plate and fill the empty space with salad or veg, use a smaller plate, avoid nibbling while cooking, skip second helpings, don't pick at leftovers, and stick to recommended portion sizes on food packaging.

### LOSE THE BOOZE

The health benefits of avoiding alcohol can be seen overnight – there's no hangover the next day – but a week without booze can make skin look healthier and better hydrated (alcohol is a diuretic so causes fluid to be lost from the body) and improve sleep which, in turn, reduces fatigue, boosts energy, and improves concentration and mood. While a few drinks may help us nod off, alcohol suppresses the rapid eye movement (REM) stage of sleep, which affects the sleep quality.

A study from Finland found moderate amounts of alcohol – around two drinks for men and one drink for women – reduced sleep quality by 24%, while more than this meant the quality of sleep was reduced by 39%.

### GO SLOW

Rushing meals or eating on the run means we can swallow extra air. And when we don't chew food properly, we miss out on the first step of digestion where enzymes in saliva start to break down starch in food. It means our digestive system has to work harder, creating extra gas along the way – and it's a buildup of air and gas that can cause burping, flatulence, discomfort and bloating.

Eating more slowly and mindfully also helps us recognise when we're full so we stop munching before we become uncomfortable – it takes 20 minutes for the brain to get the signal from the stomach that we're satisfied.

### SLOW DOWN ON SUGAR

Within seconds of eating or drinking something sugary, bacteria that live in the plaque on our teeth start to break down the sugar, creating acids that attack the tooth enamel. If this happens frequently, it increases the risk of developing holes or cavities in teeth that need filling.

Saliva helps neutralise these acids, but teeth remain exposed to acid attack for up to an hour, so it's the frequency rather than the quantity of sugary foods and drinks we consume that puts teeth at the greatest risk of decay. Alongside limiting how often we consume these foods, it's best to have them as part of a meal when we naturally produce more saliva. Studies also show chewing sugarfree gum that contains xylitol (a non-sugar sweetener) after eating also helps to prevent tooth decay by stopping plaque from forming and bacteria from sticking to teeth. Keep acidic foods, fizzy drinks, beer, cider, prosecco and wine to mealtimes, too. These temporarily soften the enamel, making teeth vulnerable to damage over time.