

**- Eating customs**

# 10 healthier eating habits to follow

## Sustainable tips on how to improve your health

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Aimee Tritt, a dietitian in Minneapolis, said she sees the same pattern over and over: People want to become healthier, so they abruptly overhaul their diets, only to burn out a few weeks later.



If this has happened to you, know that you're not a failure, said Tritt, who also teaches dietetics at the University of Minnesota. "The goal was the problem; it was too aggressive."

A better approach is to set small intentions that you implement gradually, she said.

With that in mind, we asked about a dozen experts for the advice they would give for healthier eating. There's something for everyone in their suggestions — consider trying one or two that resonate with you most.

### 1. EAT MORE LEGUMES

Legumes like lentils, peas and beans are packed with protein and a suite of other valuable nutrients, said Christopher Gardner, a nutrition scientist and professor of medicine at Stanford University.

A cup of pinto beans, for example, provides about 16g of both protein and fibre, as well as plenty of iron and magnesium. And research suggests that replacing red and processed meats with plant proteins can reduce your risk of cardiovascular disease and earlier death. It also has the added benefit of being better for the environment.

Legumes are affordable and versatile, Gardner said. Toss white beans into a minestrone soup, steam edamame for a quick snack or purée some chickpeas to make hummus.

### 2. SCALE BACK ON SWEET DRINKS

If you regularly consume sugary sodas, energy drinks, coffee or cocktails, cutting back may be one of the best ways to improve your health, said Maya Vadiveloo, an associate professor of nutrition at the University of Rhode Island.

Sweet drinks account for more than a third of the added sugars people in the United States consume — and overdoing it can have serious consequences, including increased risks for Type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular and liver diseases and obesity.

You don't need to cut out sugar "cold turkey," Vadiveloo said. Instead, find ways to scale back, like ordering a small soda instead of a large at lunch, or asking for fewer pumps of syrup in your morning Starbucks. Eventually, you might forego the sweet drinks completely.

### 3. PUT VEGETABLES IN EVERYTHING

Most adults in the United States don't consume enough vegetables, so they are missing out on their antioxidants, anti-inflammatory compounds, fibre and essential nutrients.

To boost your vegetable consumption, look for ways to "add a little to a lot of different types of meals", said Angela Odoms-Young, an associate professor of nutrition at Cornell University. Add sun-dried tomatoes to scrambled eggs; top a rice and bean bowl with arugula; saute onions, bell peppers and shredded carrots with ground meat for tacos; or toss frozen broccoli, collard greens or okra into soups.

### 4. EAT FEWER ULTRA-PROCESSED FOODS

Nearly 60% of the calories adults in the United States consume come from ultra-processed foods like hot dogs, lunch meats, sodas and certain snacks and baked goods. That's concerning, said Marion Nestle, an emeritus professor of nutrition, food studies and public health at New York University, because researchers have linked ultra-processed foods to various health issues, including Type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and obesity.

One problem with ultra-processed foods, research suggests, is that they can be easy to overconsume. "These foods make you eat calories you don't realise you're eating," Nestle said.

You don't have to banish ultra-processed foods entirely, she added, but incorporating more minimally processed or whole foods into your diet may improve your health and help you lose weight without feeling hungry or deprived.

### 5. TAKE A WALK AFTER MEALS

Emma Laing, a professor and director of dietetics at the University of Georgia, said in an email that what you eat is just one aspect of your health. Physical activity goes "hand in hand" with good nutrition, she wrote.

Dr Laing likes to take a short walk after lunch, or whenever she can fit it into her day; it helps with digestion and blood sugar control, she said, and it improves her sleep, heart and muscle health and immune function. It's also one of her favourite parts of the day — it gives her a mood boost and a mental break — and that's what has helped make it a regular habit.

If you can't make it outside for a walk, Laing said that you might climb up and down some stairs, dance to your favourite music or do some gentle stretching. And consider trying new activities like Pilates, kickboxing, rock climbing, hiking or team sports.

### 6. TRY EATING THREE SQUARE MEALS PER DAY

When Tritt's nutrition clients tell her they have trouble with late-night snacking, she responds by asking if they've eaten enough throughout the day.

The answer is often no, Tritt said. People may skip breakfast or jam through the workday without pausing for lunch or even a snack. After dinner, they may still be hungry, she said, "feeling a little out of control" as they snack on less healthy options.

Tritt suggested starting the day with breakfast — toast with peanut butter, for example, or Greek yoghurt with granola and berries — and incorporating a balanced lunch with plenty of protein, healthy fats and complex carbohydrates. Don't be afraid to add nourishing snacks as needed, she said.

#### 7. MAKE BIG BATCHES OF FOOD WHEN YOU CAN

Preparing meals at home is one of the best things you can do for your health, said Emily Haller, a dietitian at Trinity Health Ann Arbor in Michigan.

Home cooked meals are almost always better for you — usually less processed and lower in sodium and added sugars — than prepackaged or restaurant meals.

Haller suggested using your weekends or other free moments to prepare batches of staple ingredients.

Brown rice, quinoa, roasted vegetables, shredded chicken and sautéed tofu, for example, can be combined into various satisfying meals like burrito bowls, salads and wraps, she said.

#### 8. USE CONVENIENCE FOODS TO BUILD HEALTHY MEALS

Dr Nate Wood, the director of culinary medicine at the Yale School of Medicine, loves to cook and has prepared plenty of elaborate meals from scratch.

But his best advice for healthier eating is to use simple, packaged foods like frozen vegetables, canned beans, tinned fish and precooked whole grains to more easily prepare balanced meals at home.

You can whip up a stir fry with frozen vegetables or a pasta puttanesca with tinned anchovies and canned tomatoes in just a few minutes, no chopping required, Wood said. Or add a generous heap of warm, canned lentils to a bed of leafy greens, goat cheese and pumpkin seeds to elevate a salad from a side dish to a main. “That is not cheating,” he said.

#### 9. GO EASY ON ALCOHOL

The harms of even modest amounts of alcohol have become clearer in recent years, said Niyati Parekh, a professor of public health nutrition at New York University. Even moderate drinking — defined as one drink or less per day for women, or two drinks or less per day for men — can increase your risk of developing certain types of cancer and some forms of cardiovascular disease.

If you drink regularly, consider rethinking that habit, Parekh said. Instead of your nightly glass of wine with dinner, for example, try having a nonalcoholic cocktail or a seltzer a few nights per week.

#### 10. IF YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH FOOD HAS SUFFERED, WORK ON IMPROVING IT

Food can be a wonderful source of joy. But if you have been hyper-focused on perfect nutrition or frustrated with cycles of dieting, weight loss and regain, you may associate it with restriction or shame, said Amanda Li, a dietitian at the University of Washington Medical Center.

To repair your relationship with food, consider working with a dietitian, Li said, who can help you develop strategies to plan nourishing meals, try new cuisines, cook with family or friends, or slow down to eat more mindfully.

This process can take time, but eventually it will foster a positive, relaxed attitude about eating, helping you to enjoy various foods and trust your body to tell you when it's full — all of which are linked with better nutrition and health, Li said.