



HEALTHY AT HOME

Little Nutrition Nudges for a Big Health Boost

Upgrading your diet doesn't have to mean broccoli and lemon water all the time. These bite-size strategies yield major benefits with minimal effort.

BY BETH WEINHOUSE

MONDAY. NEXT WEEK. Next month. As the pandemic dragged on, many of us made grand plans to transform our diets, vowing to go vegan, cut out sugar, guzzle a million glasses of water a day...but it was so easy to procrastinate. Here's the thing, though: You don't need to completely overhaul your diet. All it takes to improve your health is a few simple tweaks, like the effective yet eminently doable ideas we've rounded up here. Pick one or two—or try them all—and see how small shifts lead to great things.

Veg Out at Breakfast

Most Americans don't eat the recommended two to three daily cups of vegetables, says Marisa Moore, RDN, a dietitian in Atlanta. "I like to think of suggestions that add things to your plate rather than subtract," she notes. Breakfast is a prime opportunity to sneak in more veggies. "For instance, have leftover Brussels sprouts with your eggs or add broccoli to your tofu scramble," she says. Both Brussels sprouts and broccoli are high in vitamin C, fiber, and potassium, a mineral and type of electrolyte essential to healthy muscle and nerve function.

Embrace Frozen Produce

Fresh, local fruits and vegetables are wonderful. But if they're not readily available or affordable, don't knock frozen varieties, Moore says. "In the United States, a lot of our produce is shipped all over the country from California. Every day it's out of the ground or off a tree or vine, it loses more nutrients. Frozen produce has been picked at the peak of freshness, and freezing locks those nutrients in."

Mix Up Your Menu

Is oatmeal your morning go-to? Do you have a turkey sandwich on the daily? "We're creatures of habit," says Whitney Stuart, RDN, owner of Whitnness Nutrition. The problem, she says, is that when we eat the same things over and over again, we may miss out on other foods that contain important nutrients.

If adding new foods to your repertoire feels too daunting, try just switching up your spices. "Most people are used to adding salt and pepper as their main source of seasoning, but spices and herbs have so much flavor and benefit," Moore says. Instead of reaching for the saltshaker, try garlic, rosemary, oregano, or a blend of all three, which will deliver robust taste with less sodium.

Another payoff: Many herbs are full of vitamins and nutrients. Take parsley, which is an excellent source of vitamins A and C, both crucial to eye health. And just two tablespoons of fresh basil contains about a quarter of your daily recommended amount of vitamin K, which helps stave off blood clots and build healthy bones.

Pump Up the Probiotics

To support the body's microbiome—the collection of microorganisms that live in the digestive tract and play a key role in overall health—go for fermented foods rich in probiotics, like kefir, yogurt, fresh sauerkraut, and kimchi. To get your daily ferments in, Maxine Barish-Wreden, MD, an integrative and functional medicine phy-

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sician with Sutter Medical Group in Sacramento, California, recommends this salad dressing recipe: "I mix fresh sauerkraut—the kind that contains no vinegar, found in the refrigerated section—with sauerkraut juice and extra-virgin olive oil. Even my patients who say they don't like sauerkraut actually enjoy this. Once it's all mixed in, the flavor of the sauerkraut is subtle."

Blend Some Brain Food

"When I see someone who feels like it's too hard to make significant changes, I might ask them to start with a smoothie," Barish-Wreden says. "It's a simple way to combine a lot of healthy stuff in one drink." Her recommended blend includes nutrients that are important for brain health. Leafy greens, like kale and spinach, are high in folate, which research suggests may help slow cognitive decline (as well as support a healthy heart). And berries are high in flavonoids, which can help improve memory. "You can also put in kefir, which I prefer over yogurt, as it tends to have more probiotics," Barish-Wreden says. Probiotics enhance communication between the gut and the brain and may help improve mood and cognitive function.

Please Be Seated

"Research has shown that people eat 5 percent less when they're sitting down at a table, compared with standing up or leaning against a counter," says Susan Albers, PsyD, a clinical psychologist with the Cleveland Clinic. "Sitting helps us focus and makes us think about what we're eating. It also helps with digestion—the body processes food better when we're sitting down." Kindly note that this doesn't mean plopping down in front of the TV. Pull up to a table and give your food your full attention.

Smile

It can help reduce food cravings, according to a study at the University of Wuppertal in Germany. Participants were told to read aloud while either smiling or frowning. Afterward, they were exposed to food cues designed to trigger cravings. The frowning group experienced increased food cravings, but the smilers didn't—and the preventive effect was particularly pronounced among those who were emotional eaters. Albers suggests smiling between bites for a similar result. "It creates that pause moment and helps release serotonin," she says. "We do less emotional eating when we're feeling happier." That brief break between bites—it's hard to smile while you're chewing—also helps you assess whether you're satisfied. "Not full," Albers says, "but *satisfied*." ■

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