

Fun Fact of the Week

8 Small, Easy Ways to Spring Clean Your Eating Habits*

By Abby Langer, R.D.

It's all about tiny, manageable changes.

Spring is finally here! If you live in Canada, like me (or anywhere that has a semblance of winter), you probably share my unbridled joy at seeing the trees flowering and knowing there are no more snow- and salt-stained pants in your near future. All of this greenery may have you craving a little dietary refresh. If your diet has been off the rails since the holidays, don't worry, mine has, too. There's no need to feel bad about it. It was a long winter, and now's the perfect time for spring cleaning—both your closet and your eating habits.



I just want to put one thing out there right now, and that is my disdain for the term “clean eating.” It's too vague, and let's keep moral judgments out of our food, OK? Clean versus dirty, good versus bad ... it can all make the way you eat feel tied up in your worth as a person, which is not the goal. Spring cleaning isn't about clean eating, but about doing away with eating habits that ultimately don't make you feel healthy and happy.

The following eight tips are solid ideas I use several times a year when I feel the need to redirect my eating habits. Yup, it totally happens to me, too.

1. Skip the juice cleanses, detoxes, and fad diets.

These "quick fixes" won't result in any lasting weight loss (not to mention any good habits learned). Depriving yourself isn't healthy or productive, and it usually backfires miserably. Why get onboard a diet merry-go-round?

If you're trying to lose weight (and I'm not suggesting that should be your goal), focusing on a more moderate loss of around 1 pound a week, using a method that isn't based on intense restriction, is the best approach. That means drastic diets are out, even though I know how tempting those schemes can be. You're better off with slow, steady and sustainable. And remember that weight loss is about so much more than what you eat and how you exercise. Factors like sleep and stress, along with some outside of your control, like hormonal fluctuations and health conditions, all come into play here.

It's also completely fine if you're not trying to lose weight and instead just trying to eat healthier. Still, juice cleanses, detoxes, and fad diets aren't the way to go. They often require cutting out entire food groups, which is tough to stick to in the long-term, and can make it easy to skimp on important nutrients, like fiber (please stop juicing your vegetables!)

2. Literally clean out your fridge and pantry.

It's perfectly fine to indulge when an intense craving strikes. But if you're really looking to tune up your eating habits, be mindful of the junk foods you keep stocked in the house. For example, if you love dark chocolate and can limit yourself to a square or two a day, sure, there's no need to toss the bag you've got in the fridge. But get rid of any trigger foods (that is, foods that make you lose all control once you start eating them) and any junk you eat out of convenience, not because you actually savor the taste.

Give it away to unsuspecting friends, bring it into the office, anything. (I'd say give it to the food bank, but I hate when people only donate junk food to food pantries—so if you're going to do that, consider adding some healthier options to the mix, too.)

After you've gotten rid of any trigger foods, go to the grocery store and restock your shelves with fresh, less-processed choices. Now you're not giving yourself a chance to default to ultra-processed food whenever you have the slightest craving.

3. Just like you swap out heavy clothes from your closet, swap out some heavy food from your diet.

Don't get me wrong, winter comfort foods are pretty satisfying. But in-season produce gets so delicious right about now (and it can be kinder to your wallet). Get going on some asparagus, rhubarb, green peas, artichokes, lettuce, and strawberries! You can find a list of what's in season [right here](#). Take advantage of fresh produce to reacquaint yourself with a lighter, fresher diet.

4. Think about what you're eating before you eat it.

Weight is very individual, so what applies to me may not apply to you. However, I find that when I gain weight, it's because of two things: I'm eating too much sugar, and I'm picking at everything in sight. That picking adds up big time, and the thing is, it's completely mindless. A bite of my daughter's cookie. A piece of my husband's potatoes.

As soon as I stop this grazing, my weight goes down.

If you're trying to maintain or lose weight, cutting back on that mindless eating can help (especially because this kind of snacking usually happens with treats, not apple slices). But trying to eat mindfully is helpful whether you're trying to lose weight, gain weight, or just be healthier. It helps you tune into your body's hunger and satiety cues, so you're not eating too little or too much.

Concentrate on what you're eating and if you're really hungry at that moment. Slow down while you're eating, and make sure you're not just going at it mindlessly. Here are some more ways to make mindful eating easier.

5. Cut back on the alcohol.

I know patio season is here, but with the holidays in the rear-view mirror, now's the time to cut down on your drinking if you're trying to change your eating habits. Alcohol is basically worthless in terms of nutrition and may cause you to make less healthy food choices while you're drinking it. Those late-night food delivery services exist for a reason, people!

Of course, you can definitely drink alcohol and be healthy—I'm not a fan of completely removing things you love from your diet. But healthy, sustainable eating is about moderation, and that extends to alcohol, too. Drinking in moderation is having no more than one drink a day for women of all ages. Staying within those bounds is good for your health, and if you're trying to lose weight, it's an easy way to get rid of extra calories.

6. Start cooking, stop taking out.

Eating healthier is work. But putting in the effort to cook for yourself is so worth it, especially in the long-term. Cooking for yourself means you're taking control of what you put into your body, and that's a good thing.

Start by grocery shopping on a weekend and preparing one or two proteins (a tray of chicken breasts and some black beans, for example), a pot or pan of starch (think roasted potatoes or brown rice), and two to three vegetables (salad counts!) for the week ahead. This way, you'll be ready for lunches and suppers, and not scrambling for the takeout menus at the end of the day or stopping for food on your way home from work in a hunger-induced haze. Here's everything you need to meal prep your heart out.

7. Make one meal of the day veggie-based.

Women between the ages of 19 and 50 need 2.5 cups of vegetables per day, according to the United States Department of Agriculture. Very few of us get even close to that much—according to the most recent data from the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention, 86 percent of Americans didn't meet their vegetable intake recommendations.

One way I help myself eat more vegetables is by having a huge salad as one of my meals every day. That way, I know that most of my daily vegetable needs are taken care of.

8. Slash the sugar.

Winter is candy season. Starting with Halloween and ending with Easter eggs, it's like a vortex of sugar. I'm not saying that you need to cut all the sugar out of your diet, (remember, we're going for sustainable, not punishing) but try replacing some of those sweetened drinks and snacks with healthier choices that aren't full of added sweeteners. Added sugar has no nutritional value and in excess can mess with your blood sugar, make you feel fatigued, contribute to diabetes, and is even linked to cardiovascular problems.

For a healthy-ish treat, try date-based caramels or sesame orange snack bars!

And remember that the point isn't to remove every granule of sugar from your diet in a frenzy just because the weather's heating up. It's about fueling your body in a thoughtful way and knowing that the rest will take care of itself.

* <https://www.self.com/story/spring-clean-eating-habits>