

# Healthy Eating: Starting a Plan for Change

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### Introduction

If you have decided to start a healthy eating plan, congratulations! Making that decision is an important step in becoming a healthier person.

Keep these key points in mind:

- When you're trying to develop new habits—whether it's healthy eating, getting more exercise, or quitting smoking—you have a better chance of success if you make a plan ahead of time.
  - Knowing **why** you want to eat healthier can help you make changes in your eating habits. And writing down your reasons will be a good reminder later on if you get discouraged.
  - A plan for forming new habits includes long-term and short-term goals as well as ideas for getting past barriers—things that might get in the way of your success.
  - Start with small, short-term goals that you can reach pretty easily. It's easier to stay with something new when you have early, frequent successes.
  - Support from family and friends can go a long way toward helping you find success in eating healthier. Don't be afraid to let them know what you're trying to do—and ask for their help.
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### How do you start a healthy eating plan?

It's important not to jump in too far too fast. Slow, steady steps will set you up for success. In this section you'll learn about the steps to follow in setting up a healthy eating plan:

- Set your goals.
- Track your progress.
- Think about your barriers.
- Get support—from others and from yourself.

#### Set your goals

When you are clear about your reasons for starting a healthy eating plan, it's time to set your goals.

What is your **long-term goal**? A long-term goal is something you want to reach in 6 to 12 months. For example, your long-term goal may be to:

- Lower your blood pressure and/or cholesterol.
- Reach a healthy weight for your body type.

What are the **short-term goals** that will help you get there? Short-term goals are things that you want to do tomorrow and the day after. For example, you might decide to:

- Switch to low-fat or fat-free milk or soy milk instead of whole milk on your cereal to reduce the amount of fat you take in.
- Cut back on eating fast food to once a week, or eat red meat only 3 times a week.
- Change a Habit by Setting Goals

Here are some quick tips about healthy eating goals:

- Instead of changing your diet overnight, make your changes one at a time.
- Try **adding** something to your diet instead of taking something away. Add foods that you think you need more of, like fruits and vegetables. If you start off by taking things out of your diet—like foods that are high in fat or sugar—you might feel deprived. And that will make it harder for you to change.
- Choose more of the healthy foods that you enjoy. Make a list of the foods you like, and see how you can change them to make them healthier. For example, make pizza at home using low-fat mozzarella cheese and lots of fresh vegetables. Is there a special raw vegetable that you like? Stock up on it—and reach for it whenever you want a snack.
- Write down your goals, and hang them up where you can see them. Reading your goals can be a helpful reminder.
- Don't set goals that involve losing weight fast. Rapid weight loss is not healthy and is hard to keep doing.

## Track your progress

Keeping track of your progress helps you see how far you've come. It also helps you stay with your plan.

- Use a notebook, journal, or food record form to keep track of the healthy things you do. Look this over when you begin to doubt yourself or feel discouraged.
- Pay attention to how you feel. Can you notice any difference when you are eating better? Or do you notice any difference when you sometimes eat poorly?
- Notice whether your food preferences change. As we change what we eat, we learn to like new foods. You may find that you don't like some of the foods you used to eat before you started making changes in your diet. And you may have learned to like new foods that you thought you didn't like.
- Look over any lab tests you might have if you are following a special diet. You may notice improvements.
  - Blood sugar tests will tell you whether your diet is helping to control your diabetes.
  - Periodic blood tests can measure your cholesterol and triglyceride levels.
  - You can measure your blood pressure to see whether dietary changes are improving it.
    - High Blood Pressure: Checking Your Blood Pressure at Home
- Every time you meet a goal, reward yourself.

## Think about your barriers

Take the time to think about what things could get in the way of your success. We call these things barriers. And by thinking about them now, you can plan ahead for how to deal with them if they happen.

Here are some tips for dealing with barriers:

- It's perfectly normal to try something, stop it, and then get mad at yourself. Lots of people have to try and try again before they reach their goals.
- If you feel like giving up, don't waste energy feeling bad about yourself. Remember your reason for wanting to change, think about the progress you've made, and give yourself a pep talk and a pat on the back. Then you may feel like eating healthy again.
- When you hit a barrier—and most people do—get support. Talk to your family members and friends to see if someone wants to eat healthy with you or cheer you on.
- Don't forget little rewards. Something to look forward to can keep you moving right along.

Expect to encounter some barriers. And remember: The idea is not to get rid of barriers but to identify them ahead of time and plan what you will do to deal with them.

It might help you to have a written personal action plan where you list your goals, your barriers, and your plans to get past those barriers.

- Healthy Eating: Overcoming Barriers to Change

## **Get support—from others and from yourself**

The more support you have, the easier it will be to change your eating habits.

If your family members tell you that they love how you're getting healthier, you'll probably be motivated to keep up the good work.

And there's more support out there. You can even ask for encouragement. Here are a few things to look for:

- Change your eating habits with a partner. It's motivating to know that someone is sharing the same goals. That person can remind you how far you've come. And that person can even motivate you with what he or she has accomplished.
- Friends and family may be a great resource. Family members can eat healthy meals with you. They can encourage you by saying how they admire you for making hard changes. Friends may tell you how good you look because your eating habits have changed. Don't be afraid to tell family and friends that their encouragement makes a big difference to you.
- You might join a class or support group. People in these groups often have some of the same barriers you have. They can give you support when you don't feel like staying with your eating plan. They can boost your morale when you need a lift.
- Don't forget to reward yourself. When you reach one of your goals—for example, eating five servings of fruits and vegetables a day for 1 week—give yourself a present. Buy a new healthy cookbook. Take a cooking class. Or just take some time for yourself. Do whatever it takes to remind yourself that you've been meeting your goals. You're successful!

Support is everywhere. You just have to look for it.

- Healthy Eating: Getting Support When Changing Your Eating Habits
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## Credits for Healthy Eating: Starting a Plan for Change

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