



Nutrition Articles

Five Game Changing Nutrition Skills That Can Completely Change Your Life

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If you were to ask, what is the most important thing for weight loss, most people would tell you to start an exercise plan or pick the right diet. Although both of these play a role in overcoming obesity, the number one most important thing you can do is to take control of what you are putting in your mouth.

Most people have little to no control when, what, or how much they eat. Due to poor nutrition skills, even people who are actively dieting have very little power to make dietary choices that will allow them to effectively create an energy deficit and lose weight.

This is why rebound weight gain is the norm, with fewer than 5 percent of people being able to sustain significant weight loss of 10 percent of body weight for more than a year. Instead, most people are at the will of their environment, consuming poor quality food whenever it is at arm's reach.

For example, humans grossly underestimate calorie intake, often to the tune of 500 to 1,000 calories a day. Additionally, the average person's food supply is comprised of low-quality, high energy nutrients with added sugar that wreak havoc on metabolic function and blood sugar.

With this dietary composition, weight loss becomes impossible and disease increases. Case in point: Despite the popularity of food and nutrition in the mainstream and more weight loss advice than ever on the internet, diabetes and obesity rates are growing. The most recent statistics show that U.S. obesity rates rose to 39.6 percent of adults and 18.5 percent of children, an increase of about 5 percent from 2007 when 33 percent of adults were classified as obese.

Obesity isn't just an aesthetic issue. It significantly increases risk of diabetes, cancer, and cardiovascular disease:

In 2017, scientists came out with a list of 13 cancers that were closely linked with obesity. The connection is complicated but we know that obesity causes inflammation, which harms DNA and increases tumor growth.

Diabetes also increases with obesity and officials estimate that 100 million Americans (about a third of the population) have diabetes or prediabetes. Caused by an excess of calories and a sedentary lifestyle, poor diet contributes to diabetes by raising insulin and leading to metabolic derangements so that the body is no longer able to safely regulate blood sugar.

Excess body fat also places an increased load on the heart, while raising inflammation that harms blood vessels and leads to atherosclerosis. Although heart disease can often be controlled with medications, nutrition (combined with exercise) is a more effective method of preventing or reversing risk factors.

The solution to this nightmare is skill based.

Nutrition is a science that experts spend years studying. Naturally, you don't have time to become a registered dietitian, but you can adopt tools that allow you to make informed decisions about what you put in your mouth. What follows are the top five game-changing skills that will transform your life.

#1: Create An Eating Schedule That Incorporates Periods Of Fasting

Ninety-nine percent people fall into one of two eating patterns: They either eat or snack all day long, never going more than 90 minutes without calories crossing their lips, or they skip meals due to lack of time and end up gorging all evening. Both of these patterns are associated with obesity and health problems, especially diabetes.

The first step to getting your food intake under control is to establish a set eating schedule that incorporates periods of overnight fasting so that your body maintains the ability to burn body fat. It's important to have a consistent period of overnight fasting lasting at least 12 hours because this will give the digestive system a rest and allow the body to shift into fat burning mode during your non-eating period.

Fasting for 12 hours overnight may seem like normal, but studies show most people are eating more or less continuously during their waking hours and only end up with 6 to 8 hours during sleep when food doesn't pass their lips. One recent study found that people ate for an average of 18.25 hours over a 24-hour period.

Having a set eating schedule during the day lets you know when your next meal is coming and it is healthier for the metabolic organs like the liver and pancreas, which have a natural circadian rhythm. Skipping meals or eating too frequently throws off this rhythm, causing insulin resistance and fat storage in the liver.

Make It Happen: The exact eating schedule you choose will be individualized, but most overweight individuals who are new to healthy eating will benefit from eating 3 to 4 meals over a 12-hour period. For more advanced people trying to lose weight, having 3 meals over a 10- to 12-hour period can give the digestive system more time to rest and enhance fat burning in between meals.

#2: Plan Meals In Advance

Most people go to a restaurant or take-out place and opt for what looks best in the moment. Even people who eat at home rarely plan meals or consider the metabolic effects of how a meal is going to make them feel. For example, the food consulting firm Hartman Group found that more than half of dinners in the U.S. are planned less than hour before they are eaten and less than 50 percent of main dishes served at home are made from scratch.

Why is this a problem?

Besides the large hit your wallet takes from eating the majority of your meals out, restaurant and fast food dishes are more likely to contain unhealthy, obesogenic ingredients like added sugar, soybean oil, excess dietary fat, and refined carbs. Restaurant-prepared meals also tend to contain more calories than most people need: One study of chain restaurants in Philadelphia found that the average adult meal contained nearly 1,500 calories, which is close the amount a sedentary adult needs in an entire day. Interestingly, fast food restaurant meals were found to have significantly fewer calories than family style restaurants.

There's also the fact that food choices and will power deteriorate drastically when you are hungry. Hormones that are associated with feelings of hunger "turn off" rationale parts of your brain, stimulating "hedonistic," pleasurable neurons, causing cravings for less healthy foods that tend to be higher in refined carbs and fat compared to whole proteins, which have a natural hunger-dampening effect.

Make It Happen: Meal planning may seem like a drag but it could literally save you hundreds if not thousands of calories a day. By planning meals around whole protein (chicken, turkey, beef, fish, eggs, lentils and other beans, and dairy), healthy fat, and lower carb vegetables you take control of your hunger and set your brain chemistry up to stay on point throughout the day.

If this sounds boring remember that you have at least a dozen protein choices (beef, turkey, chicken, lamb, salmon, mackerel, cod, shrimp, lentils, hummus, eggs, Greek yogurt), a wide range of healthy fats (almonds, cashews, walnuts, pumpkin seeds, olive oil, avocado slices, coconut oil, etc.), and numerous low-carb veggies (spinach, lettuce, arugula, rainbow chard, collards, cucumber, celery, broccoli, cabbage, bok choy, eggplant, brussels sprouts, lima beans, summer squash, etc) that can be prepared with spices, marinades, and sauces for delicious, healthy meals.

#3: Learn To Meal Prep

If you are serious about losing body fat, you need to ensure the food you're putting in your mouth fits your goals. We've already established that winging it or relying on restaurants for food isn't going to cut it. This doesn't mean that you have to become a chef, but you do need to learn meal prep skills.

The first step is to make time to plan meals, shop, and cook. This accomplishes at least three key things that make achieving the ideal body composition easier:

First, you'll be amazed at how much more energy you have now that you're not living off refined carbs and processed food. Second, you'll be eating foods that naturally raise your metabolism, making it easier to achieve a calorie deficit so that you reach and stay at your ideal weight. Third, you'll feel empowered by the fact that you are finally taking responsibility for what you are putting in your mouth.

Make It Happen: The key to meal prep is to think big: You want to maximize your time, planning meals for the entire week. Make a list of foods you need, incorporating shelf stable foods (canned salmon or beans or precooked frozen meat or seafood that can be defrosted and quickly heated up). Get the majority of your shopping done on the weekend. Consider ways of outsourcing your meal prep especially in the middle of the week when things are crazy: Buy pre-cooked chicken or turkey or invest in meal kits or legitimately healthy prepared meals to take the pressure off. Get in microwave-safe containers that can be easily stored in the fridge and freezer.

Here's an example of how to meal prep for the week:

First pre-chop all your vegetables. Then get the stove and oven going. Cook chicken in the oven and brown meat for chili while making salads. Lay out food containers to make five salads at once: First, put in mixed greens, then chopped red bell pepper, cucumber, celery, or another veggie. Close the lids, stick them in the fridge, and move on.

Next flip the chicken on the grill. Then back to the stove to add tomatoes, onion, peppers, and spices to the chili. Remove the chicken from the oven and put in the turkey patties for breakfasts. While the turkey is cooking, season the fish for tonight's dinner. Once the patties are done, divide them into containers so they are ready for each breakfast meal.

Then, bake the fish and steam some cauliflower. While dinner finishes cooking, take the chili off and put it into containers for lunches. In about 90 minutes you've cooked and prepped food for at least your next 12 meals. During the week you can round out meals with the following suggestions:

- Add nuts or berries to breakfast.
- Sprinkle pre-chopped veggies with sea salt/pepper and sauté in coconut oil while heating up chili or soup for dinner.
- Stock the freezer with organic asparagus, cauliflower, or other vegetables and freeze extra soup or chili for an "emergency" option.

You really can eliminate packaged foods or take-out for 100 percent homemade meals. Not only will you be satisfied to finally succeed in reaching your nutritional goals, you will have more time (and money) for the most important priorities in your busy life.

#4: Test Your Blood Glucose

Anyone interested in losing body fat should be regularly testing blood sugar because it gives you a window into how your body is using energy. Chronically elevated blood sugar can be a sign that you are eating too much or too often. Or it can indicate that you're spending too much time in a sedentary state.

It's also a useful way to determine what to eat: High blood sugar indicates you need to focus on nutrition that supports insulin sensitivity and slows digestion to regulate how quickly glucose hits your blood stream after eating. This can be done by planning meals around protein, vegetables, and healthy fat, while avoiding processed foods and added sugar.

Testing blood sugar can also guide you in determining the best macronutrient ratios for weight management, athletics, or cognitive performance.

Why is high blood sugar such a problem?

People who have poorly regulated blood sugar experience large spikes of insulin in response to a meal. Over time, insulin levels stay elevated and cells develop a resistance to binding with insulin. When blood sugar and insulin are both elevated, insulin stimulates hunger, making people want to eat even if they are still "full" from a recent meal. This is important because in metabolically healthy individuals, insulin actually has a satiating effect and will blunt hunger. So getting your blood sugar and insulin health under control is a key step to avoid overeating.

Make It Happen: The first step is to buy a glucose meter online or at a drugstore. This will allow you to assess how tightly your blood sugar is regulated during the day. Take your blood glucose in a fasted state and after eating for several days to give you an idea of your average blood glucose levels in each state.

Although below 100 mg/dL is considered normal in the mainstream medical community, fasting blood glucose should be between 70-90 mg/dl, with a goal of below 84 mg/dl. Ideally, you want your post-meal glucose to be below 135 mg/dl. Large post-meal spikes in glucose indicate poor insulin health, which can be solved through exercise, lifestyle factors, and diet (start with the skills presented in this article).

#5: Get Comfortable With Hunger

For people who are completely new to healthy eating, experiencing intense hunger is not ideal because it predisposes you to make unhealthy food choices and overshoot calories. However, once you've got baseline nutrition habits dialed in, getting comfortable with hunger is a must.

Hunger can be very educational. It can help you develop a calmer and healthier relationship with food. For humans in the developed world, hunger is not an emergency—humans are actually built to function surprisingly well during a temporary food shortage.

For most people, the first step is to begin to distinguish between biological hunger and emotional hunger or “cravings.” Physical hunger occurs when blood sugar levels dip and you experience sensations such as a grumbling or emptiness in your stomach.

Emotional hunger (often called brain hunger) occurs when you are stressed, bored, lonely, or feeling some other unpleasant emotion. Eating feels good, and these negative feelings stimulate pathways in the brain that form a strong craving, often for highly palatable foods like chocolate, pizza, chips, or other junk food.

Another reason you need to get comfortable with hunger is that a basic tenet of nutrition is to “eat when you’re hungry, stop when you’re full.” This is meaningless if you don’t know what hunger actually feels like. If you’ve never paid attention to the sensation of physical hunger, it’s hard to distinguish from other things that make you want to eat.

That’s important because if you’re trying to lose weight, you need to create a calorie deficit, which requires biological changes to hormones that are going to stimulate feelings of hunger in your brain. Being able to deal with this sensation and hold out until your next scheduled meal is a requirement if you want to hit your calorie targets and get your metabolism in gear.

Most people who rarely feel hunger have a strong emotional reaction to it. They feel frantic, desperate, or fearful. They worry that hunger is unhealthy or that they are going to lose all their muscle mass. But once you get familiar with hunger, you can acknowledge that it’s just a physical sensation, which often passes if you let it. It may be a little distracting but it doesn’t need to derail your day or cause emotional distress.

The reward is that food, even super healthy food, tastes amazing when you are truly hungry. A salad with baked chicken and balsamic vinegar can taste like the best thing you’ve ever eaten. And you get the added benefit of improved digestion and nutrient absorption that occurs when you space meals further apart and give yourself the chance to experience a little bit of hunger.

Make It Happen: Before you start “hunger training,” make sure you have adopted the four other nutrition skills on this list. Remember to:

Establish an eating schedule: One of the hardest things to deal with when it comes to hunger is not knowing when you are going to eat. Having a schedule allows you to experience the feelings associated with hunger without real threat since you know when your next meal is coming.

Planning meals in advance/meal prepping: Because hunger can trigger irrational feelings, it can lead to poor food choices. Having pre-planned, home cooked healthy meals lowers the risk you will inhale a pizza or eat other foods you’d rather not.

Test your blood glucose: You want to ensure your body has the metabolic machinery to regulate blood glucose efficiently prior to extending fasting periods between meals. Otherwise, you’re going to be experiencing peaks and valleys in blood sugar and insulin, which can impair energy levels, and throw off your sense of hunger and satiety.

Once you’ve got those babies down, you can experiment with hunger. When you do feel physical hunger, don’t eat immediately. Stop and pay attention to it, noting the sensations associated with it. Try focusing on something else, such as a task at work, cleaning the house, or reading a book, and see if the feeling of hunger goes away.

When you are hungry and you do have a meal, eat slowly and focus on mindful eating, chewing completely, enjoying the flavors and textures of the food, instead of cramming food into your mouth.

Final Words: By taking the time to incorporate these five skills into your life, you are able to make informed choices about what and how you eat. Becoming empowered by food is the first step to overcoming food-guilt and start your journey to achieve the ideal body composition that you desire.

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