

Tips for Tuning Up Your Nutrition

Eating more healthful food to improve your health or reduce your waistline isn't as difficult as you may think. Small dietary changes, made gradually, can result in substantial improvement over time, according to nutrition experts.

"Healthful eating doesn't involve driving miles out of your way in search of organic produce in obscure health-food stores. It requires little more than paying attention to what you eat and slowly making more knowledgeable and healthful choices of what you put on your plate," says Joy Bauer, M.S., R.D., nutritionist and founder of Joy Bauer Nutrition center in New York.

Tune-up tips

Ms. Bauer offers the following guidelines for improving your diet and your health:

- Eat a variety of foods. Varying your food provides a much greater range of nutrients. "Eating the same foods every day supplies your body with the same exact vitamins and minerals over and over again to the exclusion of others," says Ms. Bauer. To add variety: Try recipes from new cookbooks or search the Internet for sites with healthful recipes you can download. Check out a different ethnic restaurant or recipe each week. Pick one night a week to create a meal you've never tried.
- Reduce the fat and increase the fiber in soups, stews and casseroles by replacing one-quarter to one-half of the meat with cooked brown rice, bulgur or cooked and chopped beans.
- Pump some iron into your diet by cooking stews, soups and sauces in cast-iron cookware. Some of the iron will seep into the food. "This is especially true of tomatoes," says Ms. Bauer.
- Eat more of the right kind of carbohydrates. Eighty percent of your total carbohydrate intake should come from nutrient-dense carbohydrates, such as fruits, vegetables, legumes, whole-grain products (bread, cereal, pasta), barley, couscous, oatmeal and potatoes.
- Eat more legumes. Beans, dried peas and lentils supply protein, iron, zinc, magnesium and B vitamins. Plus, they're the only high-protein food that provides ample amounts of fiber.
- Choose lean sources of protein. The leanest sources of protein include turkey breast, skinless chicken breast, egg whites, lean red meats, low-fat yogurt, skim milk, low-fat cheese, beans, lentils, all seafood and fish, split peas, chickpeas and tofu.
- Seek low-salt condiments if you're trying to reduce your sodium intake. Ketchup, mustard, salad dressings, powdered sauces, soy sauce and steak sauce are all high in sodium.
- Add vegetables to (almost) everything you eat. Add pureed carrots or roasted red peppers to pasta sauce. Replace some of the oil in nut breads and cakes with canned pumpkin. Substitute pureed green peas for half the amount of avocado in guacamole and other recipes. Use mashed potatoes to thicken soups. Put in a layer of vegetables instead of ground beef when preparing lasagna.
- Don't forget the soy. "Soy foods can boost the protein, calcium and iron content of any dish and can reduce your risk of heart disease, cancer and some other chronic conditions," says Ms. Bauer. To add some: Pour soy milk over your breakfast cereal. Blend soy flour into pancakes, muffins and cookies. Add tofu to soups, dips, stir-fry dishes and stews. Sprinkle dried soybeans on salads and into stir-fries.
- When you cook with fat, use the monounsaturated kind. Olive oil, peanut oil, sesame-seed oil and canola oil are high in monounsaturated fat -- the kind that helps lower blood cholesterol.
- Eat more rice, but not the instant kind. "Brown rice has the most fiber of rice varieties, followed by polished white rice," says Ms. Bauer. "Instant rice has the fewest nutrients."

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