

# 10 simple hacks to improve your diet

We've all been told that a healthier diet is key to a healthier body, but completely changing the way you eat can be daunting. Thankfully, there are some small steps you can take immediately to raise your diet from so-so to on-track.

Here are some of my favorite tips and tricks:

**1) Salads: Mix it up!** Iceberg lettuce and tomato, day in, day out? Virtuous, but monotonous, and nutritionally one-dimensional. Try adding some color and crunch to your salad with sliced beets, water chestnuts, palm or artichoke hearts, endives, bean sprouts, arugula, or radicchio, and sprinkle some minced walnuts, ground flaxseed, or toasted sunflower seeds on top.



**2) Have soup for breakfast:** Instead of a carbohydrate-laden breakfast of hot or cold cereal, try a bowl of split pea, lentil or black bean soup to start your day off right. The slow-release carbs in beans and pulses will power your morning, and stabilize your blood sugar through the day. Researchers have confirmed a "second meal effect" of a low-glycemic index breakfast like beans that helps combat cravings for refined carbohydrates later in the day.

**3) Drink herbal tea instead of juice or soda:** Just as our understanding emerged of the health dangers of cigarettes in the 50s and 60s, nutrition scientists are coming to recognize that sweetened drinks are a major culprit in our current epidemic of diabesity. Let your favorite flavor of herbal teabags sweetened with stevia steep in a pitcher in your refrigerator overnight for a refreshing rehydration pick-me-up. Or use a home carbonator to make bubbly water and make a tasty "spritzer" with just a dash of proanthocyanidin-rich unsweetened tart cherry, pomegranate, blueberry or cranberry juice.

**4) Mince your meat:** Most new research is exonerating meat as a health risk, especially the organic or grass-fed kind. But that doesn't mean you should have a 22-ounce Porterhouse every night! Instead, use meat the way that traditional Asian, Middle Eastern and Latin American cultures do—sparingly. Stir-fry it with vegetables, use ground meat in tacos with lots of healthy fixings, or use it to stuff peppers, cabbage or grape leaves. Or add ground beef or chuck cubes, shredded chicken or pork, or ground turkey to provide the "carne" in chili. Add chicken or turkey chunks to vegetable-rich soups. Skewer grilled lamb kebabs with peppers, tomatoes and onions.

**5) Sauté your greens:** Can't handle nutritious kale, collards, or spinach straight up? Steam them first, then sauté them in a pan with extra virgin olive oil and minced garlic. They'll be softer, taste better, and sautéing them in oil will help you to better absorb the fat-soluble carotenoids and vitamin K they're packed with.

**6) Add nuts—to veggies, salads, fruit desserts:** Nuts are a great on-the-go snack, but you can also incorporate them at mealtime. Try sprinkling them on your cooked vegetables, salads, or hot oatmeal, garnish your desserts with them, even make delicious pestos in the food processor with basil or other handy greens and pignolia nuts or walnuts. (For a comprehensive rundown of the health benefits of nuts, see my article [16 Reasons to Go Nuts Over Nuts](#))

**7) Don't give up the chocolate, wine, and coffee:** These polyphenol-laden foods have been maligned as unhealthy, but studies show they extend longevity and promote circulation; they may even confer protection against certain cancers. And they could help older adults fend off cognitive decline—except when alcohol is used in excess. Moderation is the key, and make sure you use only un-dutched dark (not milk) chocolate that is at least 70% cocoa.

**8) Make your own salad dressing:** That popular grocery store dressing is probably mostly cheap, refined GMO soybean oil, maybe with some olive oil added to burnish its label. If you're not wary, it'll contain unwholesome preservatives and "emulsifiers." Instead, save money and reap health benefits by making a jar of vinaigrette with artisanal, extra virgin olive oil, balsamic vinegar, chopped garlic and fresh spices and/or premium mustard.

**9) Use herb marinades:** Grilling, frying and broiling yield tasty char on meats, fish and poultry, but these cooking methods generate harmful **Advanced Glycation End-products (AGEs)** and Polycyclic Aromatic Hydrocarbons (PAHs) which can damage cells. Studies show the harmful effects of compounds generated by high-temperature cooking can be neutralized, at least in part, by marinating proteins in citrus juice or vinegar with added herbs like rosemary, oregano, and thyme.

**10) Spice it up!** Some like it hot. If you're a fan of red-hot Mexican or Szechuan cuisine, you may extend your longevity. In a study of nearly half a million volunteers in China, those who ate chilies just a couple times a week had a **10 percent lower risk of death**. *Daily* chili eaters had a 14 percent lower risk of dying. It's thought that capsaicin, the active ingredient in chilies, has anti-inflammatory, circulatory-enhancing and antimicrobial effects.

Try out these simple diet hacks, and send your own healthy suggestions to [radioprogram@aol.com](mailto:radioprogram@aol.com). We'll share them with *Intelligent Medicine* podcast listeners on our next edition of the *Q&A with Leyla* podcast!