


The Whole30: A review

It's January, a time for dietary rectitude. I'm resigned to the fact that I'll never be an astronaut, a Major League baseball player, or dance like Gene Kelly.

Nonetheless, I CAN embark on a nutritional adventure. So, in the name of science, on Christmas Day, I took the 30-day challenge according to the guidelines outlined in "It Starts With Food".

The Whole30, by Dallas and Melissa Hartwig, is a viral phenomenon. It's a quasi-Paleo diet formulated in 2009 by a sports nutritionist couple to promote "weight loss, enhanced quality of life, and a healthier relationship with food—accompanied by stunning improvements in sleep, energy levels, mood, and self-esteem." Many thousands are now trying it. 

I've applied a similar diet approach for years at the Hoffman Center to combat obesity, reverse diabetes, lower cardiovascular risk, reduce blood pressure, improve digestion, even to treat certain autoimmune diseases like MS, lupus, and rheumatoid arthritis. Many patients with fatigue, depression and "brain fog" also respond favorably.

There are a raft of similar diets out there: Dr. William Davis' "Wheat Belly", Dr. Terry Wahl's "Wahl's Diet", and Dr. Loren Cordain's "Paleo Diet." What these diets have in common is that they purge "modern" foods from the menu: No cereal grains, no processed foods, no sugar, in some cases no legumes, dairy, refined oils, or nightshade vegetables.

The Whole30 applies its own food rules. There are zero grains, not even brown rice, amaranth or quinoa. Dairy is verboten—the Hartwigs even prefer ghee to butter. Legumes and pulses are prohibited—even peanut butter.

Where possible, foods are naturally-sourced: organic fruits and vegetables, organic or grass-fed meats, poultry and eggs.

The diet is not ultra low-carb or ketosis-inducing per se; depending on your need for weight loss or metabolic optimization via caloric restriction, you are allowed some potatoes, sweet potatoes, yams, squash and root vegetables like carrots, turnips and rutabagas, beets, and fresh fruit (but no juice or dried fruit).

The Whole30 permits—and even encourages—healthy fats, but endeavors to switch adherents from refined vegetable oils to saturated fats from coconut oil, ghee, and even lard for sautéing. Fats from avocados and nuts are featured—but in the Hartwigs' view, walnuts, pecans and macadamias trump other nuts and seeds with their higher Omega 6 fat contents.

While alcohol and nicotine are strictly off-limits, coffee and tea—even caffeinated—are permitted, within limits.

Needless to say, this represents a radical departure from business-as-usual for people eating a standard American diet. The authors acknowledge that it won't be easy—some who take the 30-day challenge go through crashing withdrawal. This is because their hunger and satiety signaling systems are all askew due to too much refined foods, readily-digested carbs, and sugar. Moreover, many suffer from allergic withdrawal symptoms. It turns out the must-have foods you most crave—like dairy, corn, wheat, peanuts, and chocolate—are often the very foods to which you're most allergic.

The Hartwigs adopt a tough-love stance toward the hesitant—they say that the ultimate positive outcome easily justifies the initial cravings, inconvenience, and discomfort. In my experience over the years with patients, I'd say they're right.

I wasn't too far off the diet when I began it, so it was an easier transition for me than for most neophytes. But I did have a propensity to enjoy gluten-free toast with breakfast, sometimes slathered with peanut butter. I liked to drench my leftover salmon and poultry in "natural" mayonnaise—which is a Trojan Horse for refined soy or canola oil. I also was in the habit of topping off dinner with a chunk of 85% dark chocolate. And a few nights a week, I'd enjoy a couple of fingers of vodka or a dash of scotch, or wine with a meal or at a party.

As of this writing, I'm about 10 days into it. The first few days were a little rocky—I missed my bread, rice, and hot cereal and craved carbohydrates. Fortunately I'm lean and active enough to deserve to eat potatoes, sweet potatoes, and butternut squash, which were a godsend. I satisfy my peanut butter jones with a reasonable facsimile—roasted sunflower butter—which I eat on celery stalks, since gluten-free breads are off-limits.

I start the day with a heavy breakfast: leftover salmon and coconut-sautéed potatoes, or a generous slice of egg-spinach-onion-potato frittata. Lunch and dinner are meats, salad, and whole avocados, maybe with some butternut squash. "Desserts" consist of a handful of macadamia nuts, or fresh berries topped with unsweetened shredded coconut, walnuts, ground flaxseed and creamy coconut milk.

It's too early to render a final verdict, but my cravings for alcohol, chocolate, gluten-free bread and for carbs in general are abating. The first few days my system was a little confused, and at times I felt—it's hard to describe—"full-hungry," not knowing how much of this new type of food to consume to stave off that hollow feeling and to keep up my energy. But now, after about a week, I can go for hours without eating and feel fine. My energy and focus are enhanced, and I no longer experience bouts of drowsiness or fatigue. Nor am I running to see what's for dessert after big meals.

I'm also feeling good about adding diversity to my diet, with fewer poor quality fats like soy and canola oil, and more nutrient-rich foods in lieu of empty starch calories. The program requires lots of planning and organization, but once I developed a routine over the holidays, my fridge is now stocked with plenty of healthy food ingredients that I can quickly throw together during the busy work week.

I'll report back to you at the end of my 30-day personal science fair project, and provide you with more details on the Whole30, including a critical review of some of its nutritional assumptions. A diet like this may not be necessary for everyone, nor will all the foods it includes click for all dieters. But for most people, it offers a pretty good start.

Learn more about the Whole30 on their website.