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The Road to Wellness: Physical Well-Being (Nutrition)

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Simple dietary changes mean big health benefits

Food is a great source of pleasure, a shared cultural touchstone,

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and the center of many traditions. The good news is, enjoying food and eating healthy are not mutually exclusive; it's possible to do both. When you make the right choices, your taste buds *and* your body will thank you.

If you're looking to improve what you eat, but aren't willing to swear off your favorite foods altogether, you're in luck: think of changing your diet as a series of small (tasty) changes that can add up to better nutrition and better health. Consider this list a roadmap to good nutrition. There are a lot of stopping points where you can explore new foods and add a bit of variety to your diet.

1. Embrace antioxidants.

Antioxidants (beta carotene and vitamins C, E, and selenium) are great for your health and they're found in a variety of foods, from blueberries and cranberries to pecans and even dark chocolate! For one thing, they're good for your skin — check out the Mayo Clinic's list of high-antioxidant, [skin-healthy produce](#). For another, they're known to [help prevent cell damage](#), which is associated with some cancers. So make sure to load up your diet with berries, nuts, and yes, some dark chocolate too!

2. Fiber is your friend.

Fruits and vegetables (such as apples, bananas, broccoli, spinach and beets), bean and legumes, and whole grains are all great sources of fiber, so load up that salad with vegetables, and embrace the lowly legume! Not only does fiber fill you up, it has also been shown to lower cholesterol, help regulate blood sugar levels, and may even help you control your weight. There is even evidence that [fiber may help prevent some cancers](#), like colon cancer.

3. Hydrate, hydrate, hydrate.

Don't fill up on high-calorie drinks such as sodas, juices, and sports drinks. Mother Nature created the only thirst-quencher your

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body truly needs — water. It's the perfect liquid because it keeps you hydrated *and* flushes toxins from your system. Need a little flavor? Try adding lemon, berries, or mint.

4. Go organic, when possible.

Organic is a major buzzword, but there's more to it than marketing. To qualify as organic, food producers must meet [U.S. Department of Agriculture organic standards](#) that require soil free of herbicides, pesticides, fungicides, and certain fertilizers. But organic produce can be expensive, so you'll need to get the most bang for your organic buck. Try to shop at local farmers markets, buy produce in season, and focus your organic selections on the [fruits and veggies](#) that benefit most from organic farming.

5. Get colorful.

Eat a rainbow of foods. Think red peppers, orange carrots, yellow lemons, green spinach, blueberries, and purple grapes. Eating a variety of fruits and vegetables from the color spectrum exposes you to powerful bioflavonoids — which is just a fancy term for super antioxidants that help support strong cell formation and may help prevent disease.

6. Remember your 3s and 6s.

Omega-3s and Omega-6s that is. It's time to ditch the idea that all fats are bad. Polyunsaturated fats (or omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids as they are more commonly known) are essential fats that our bodies need but cannot produce. These essential fats help build healthy cells and keep your brain and nervous system healthy. Omega-3s are found in fatty fish such as salmon, mackerel, and tuna while omega-6s can be found in nuts, seeds, and plant oils such as soybean oil.

7. Steer clear of the sugary stuff.

While sugar isn't inherently bad for you, the [amount of added sugar Americans are consuming](#) every year has increased

steadily. Sugar is a major culprit in the obesity epidemic and the rising rates of Type 2 diabetes. The problem is added sugars show up in everything from bread to salad dressing to yogurt. So even though you may be avoiding dessert, your sugar intake could be high simply due to the sugars added to everyday foods.

8. Limit your meat and dairy intake.

Back in the day, a plate of meat and potatoes with a side of something green was considered a healthy meal according to the USDA's food pyramid. These days, under the USDA's new [MyPlate model](#), meat and dairy should be thought of more as a side while vegetables should get the starring role on your dinner plate. If you do eat meat, make sure you [know what you're eating](#).

9. Step away from the French fries.

Also known as partially-hydrogenated oils, artificially created trans-fats destroy cells, raise your cholesterol levels, and increase your risk of heart disease, stroke, and Type 2 diabetes.

Trans-fats are commonly found in many processed foods such as cookies, pizza, French fries, and other fried foods or baked goods, so make sure you [read nutrition labels](#).

10. Steam things up.

Steaming is one of the best and easiest ways to cook veggies. Boiling vegetables results in a loss of vitamins and minerals as they are leached out into the water during the boiling process. Fresh vegetables that are steamed retain most of their nutrients.

Stay tuned for the next installment of *The Road to Wellness: Physical Well-being* where we will focus on sleep. Want to catch up on the others? Read the whole [Road to Wellness series](#).

Lorrie Reynolds



With 25 years of preventive health and wellness experience, Lorrie Reynolds is Director of Wellness Client Accounts for Independence, accountable for leading and directing the Plan's worksite wellness programs. At Independence she has been accountable for preventive health outreach, clinical guidelines, health education content, wellness solutions operations, and expansion of preventive health outreach in the community. She proudly serves as an Advisory Board Member for the Independence Blue Crew volunteer program, and is a certified National Diabetes Prevention Program Lifestyle Coach.

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