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A new year, a new you

Nutritionist Elisa Zied offers 7 diet changes to help you feel better (and healthier) in 2008

If you're like most of us, you've been indulging in too many high-fat, high-calorie treats for the last few months and are suffering from a holiday diet hangover. But the New Year is the perfect time to put your less-than perfect eating habits behind you. Fortunately, eating well doesn't have to equal denial and deprivation. Try these 7 strategies to help boost your nutrient intake, feel more energized and enjoy a healthier body weight in 2008 and beyond.

Bulk up to slim down

What's in it for you: While protein isn't a problem for many Americans, most do fall short of the 21 to 38 grams of fiber recommended each day. Pairing foods rich in fiber and protein fills you up and curbs your appetite. The protein/fiber dynamic duo also regulates blood sugar for a steady stream of energy throughout the day. Fiber also reduces blood cholesterol levels and promotes gastrointestinal regularity.

How to do it: Choose at least one protein-rich food that's low in saturated fat and cholesterol and at least two high-fiber foods at every meal. Healthy protein picks: fat-free milk or yogurt, fish, skinless chicken or turkey breast, beans, nuts and seeds. Healthy fiber choices include whole grain bread, cereal or pasta, brown or wild rice, fresh fruit and vegetables. To boost fiber intake, reach for a whole wheat English muffin instead of a plain bagel, a whole wheat flour tortilla instead of white bread or a roll, and lentil or black bean soup instead of chicken noodle or creamy, cheesy soups, recommends Tanya Zuckerbrot, registered dietitian and author of "The F Factor Diet."

Go green

What's in it for you: Dark green leafy vegetables are loaded with the cancer-fighting antioxidant beta-carotene, as well as the carotenoids lutein and zeaxanthin, which can protect the eyes and can fight some cancers, heart disease and stroke. At a mere 20 to 30 calories per half cup, leafy veggies also provide a healthy dose of fiber, vitamin A, vitamin C, folate, and potassium.

How to do it: Aim for at least 3 cups of dark green vegetables each week. Fill a salad bowl with shredded spinach, romaine, arugula or other dark green leaves. Use lettuce leaves to dress up sandwiches. Steam or lightly sauté broccoli, spinach, kale, collard greens, mustard greens or turnip greens. (Add grated parmesan and seasonings for extra flavor.) Use fresh or frozen broccoli or spinach in pasta or stir-fry dishes, or to top potatoes or whole grain pizza crusts.

Boost your beans

What's in it for you: "If I were trapped on an island and had to choose one survival food, I'd choose beans," says David Grotto, a registered dietitian and author of "101 Foods That Can Save Your Life." Grotto loves beans because they are rich in both protein and carbohydrates, and contain loads of fiber to promote regularity, control cholesterol and reduce the risk of certain cancers. "Beans also boast folate, potassium and magnesium; and dark beans, such as black beans, contain anthocyanins, antioxidants that fight inflammation and improve brain function," he adds.

How to do it: Grotto likes to fill ice cube trays with a puree made with beans and chicken or vegetable broth. He freezes them and then drops them into pasta sauces, soups and casseroles. Chickpeas can be used to bake falafel or to bulk up a green salad. Black beans or lentils can be topped with shredded low-fat cheese to make quesadillas or fajitas.

Eat fish

What's in it for you: Fish offers high-quality protein, vitamins and minerals. It's also low in saturated fat and often provides fewer calories per ounce than beef or poultry. Fish contains potent omega-3 fatty acids, known to reduce the risk of prostate cancer, heart disease and possibly even Alzheimer's disease. It also helps protect the eyes from macular degeneration and wards off diabetes.

How to do it: Replace three beef or poultry meals each week with a 4-ounce portion of fish. For particularly potent omega-3s opt for herring, mackerel, salmon, sardines, trout or tuna. Grill, steam, broil or bake fish (without breading) and use canned varieties to top salads or sandwiches.

Pump up potassium

What's in it for you: Potassium works with sodium to maintain water balance in the body. It also dampens the effects of a high-sodium diet on blood pressure, reduces the risk of kidney stones and may stave off bone loss later in life. Because potassium is found in so many whole foods, including leafy green vegetables, fruits from vines and root vegetables, consuming more potassium-rich foods can fill you up and improve your overall nutrient intake.

How to do it: Aim for 4 1/2 cups of fruits and vegetables each day and potassium-rich options from all the food groups. Best bets: prunes, prune juice, peaches, tomato sauce, sweet potatoes, soybeans, lima beans, peanuts, pistachios, and fish such as halibut, tuna and cod. Milk, yogurt, and cereal are high in the nutrient as well.

Stay on portion patrol

What's in it for you: "Switching the focus from what not to eat to how much to eat is the best strategy for long-term weight management, especially for those of us who passively over-consume calories," says James O. Hill, Ph.D, author of "The Step Diet." Watching portion sizes, but still eating foods you enjoy can minimize the feeling of deprivation that can lead to overeating and guilt.

How to do it: Lisa Young, Ph.D., author of "*The Portion Teller*," recommends keeping a food record as a first step to curb portions. Once you see what and how much you really eat and drink, you can try to increase portions of healthful foods and decrease portions of fatty or sugary foods, Young says.

Put less on your plate or use smaller plates, recommends Hill. Eat slowly, savoring every bite and waiting at least five minutes after you have finished before you opt for more. "You'll be amazed that most of the time you'll be satisfied and won't want or need more" says Hill.

Think marathon, not sprint

What's in it for you: If you try to change too many diet habits at once, you won't give your body and mind enough time to adjust and it'll be more difficult to make the changes stick. Don't worry about every little bite, or feel guilty when you eat too much or have a so-called "forbidden" food. It'll take all the fun out of eating and that's a recipe for failure.

How to do it: Cut yourself some slack. Set one small, realistic goal at a time and pace yourself. This week, simply eat more green vegetables. Next week, eat more beans. Over time, each small change will become a lifelong habit. Plan out your meals and snacks. Don't waste calories on things you don't love. Make every calorie count, enjoy each bite and remember to fit in regular exercise -- the other half of the healthy eating and living equation.

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