

Planning to Eat Well

One of the main reasons we fail to achieve any goal is because we don't have a plan. "I'm going to eat healthier" is not a plan! A plan means understanding the detail of the specific things you are going to do to achieve your goal. Sometimes we shy away from formulating a detailed plan because we fear failure to stick to the plan which would just be another reason to beat ourselves up. For other people planning is just not sexy or exciting enough – it's the sort of thing your mum does - but being organised and having a plan will greatly increase your chances of success in any endeavour, and sticking to a healthy diet is no exception.

Start by having a plan to plan! Have a particular day each week that you plan your meals for the coming week. You'll probably find it works best to tie it in with shopping days. Creating a plan for your meals for the week has numerous benefits:

- It allows you to shop more efficiently (less trips to the shops and less money spent) and be less wasteful. If budget is a significant consideration for you then you probably want to plan and shop in parallel: find out what the best deals are this week and plan meals around those foods.
- Your chances of sticking to a healthy eating regime are increased. Deciding what to eat is often the most challenging part of getting a healthy meal on the table.
- Thinking about what is coming up this week and which days or nights will be the busiest gives you the opportunity to identify ways that you can minimise meal pressures on those days by choosing things that are really quick and easy to prepare or having something the day before that will provide a quick meal of leftovers.
- It enables you to look at the 'big picture' of what you're eating and ensure that across the week you are getting a good balance of nutrients.

You can increase your chances of sticking to your planned healthy eating even further by advance preparation. The quicker and easier it is to put your meal together when you are busy and tired the more likely you are to do it:

- Look for opportunities to cook in bulk at the weekend and freeze individual portions for use during the following weeks.
- If you're freezing meat or vegetables for use later prepare them before freezing to save time when you come to use them, for example cutting meat up into appropriate size pieces for use in stir-fry.

Healthy eating is fundamentally about two things:

1. Balancing energy intake with energy expended relative to your current needs – that is, if you need to lose weight your energy expended needs to be greater than your energy intake, if you need to gain weight the balance needs to be in the opposite direction.
2. Providing your body with an appropriate mix of nutrients. This is much more than just concerning yourself with the sugar, fat and salt content of foods. Yes, those are important factors to consider, as an excess of any of those things is harmful, but they are only a fraction of what you should be considering.

Planning enables you to structure your meals to ensure that you are getting a good balance of nutrients and avoid becoming bored with certain foods because you're eating them all the time. It also enables you to think about your planned activities for the week and therefore your likely energy expenditure. If you're planning a week of intense physical training then you need to ensure you are giving your body sufficient energy to handle that. Even if you are trying to lose weight it is a mistake to have too big a gap between energy in and energy out – you will just end up feeling exhausted and likely injuring yourself as a result. As always, balance is crucial.

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