

Top Ten Tips for Kicking the Processed Food Habit

Nutrition confusion got you down? Fresh or frozen? Sugar or stevia? Who the heck knows for sure? Following food fads too closely can make you crazy, so you find it's easier to generalize and keep your sanity intact. Okay then, is it [Mediterranean](#), [raw](#) or [paleo](#) these days? It's hard to keep up, yet surprisingly, it may actually be healthier not to. So much emphasis on following new food trends can distract us from the biggest culprit in the pantry: [processed food](#).

Where whole, healthy foods once ruled the kitchen, shiny new packages stand in their place. And consumption of these "[food-like substances](#)" is directly related to the rising rates of diet related disease in this country in more ways than one. The food we eat affects our energy levels, mood and acuity too. And while pre-packaged, [processed foods and declining health](#) go hand in hand, a fresh, whole foods diet can seem so out of reach in our fast-paced lifestyles.

But here's the thing: changing your eating habits for the better makes a serious difference. [Whole Living](#) magazine recently cited compelling stats: 69% of readers polled called cutting out processed foods the one change that bettered their life the most.

Here's the skinny: whatever your personal food profile: vegetarian, carnivore or anywhere in between, a healthy diet keeps refined and processed foods the exception, not the rule. With simple strategies for replacing at least some of these products with yummy, healthy alternatives, you'll discover a new level of health and wellness you won't want to live without.

1. Cut out refined carbohydrates, even the ones labeled with words like "healthy, organic, gluten free, high-fiber, low fat and all natural". Processed food isn't just fattening, it's linked to poor health, so it just makes sense avoid it! When in doubt use this simple rule of thumb: the more processed a product, the lower the health quality. Think [high fructose corn syrup](#) – notice any resemblance to the stuff grown on the cob? Skip it.
2. Be prepared. You know you'll be tempted to nosh here and there, so have lots of [healthy snacks](#) available. Trust me, when the only thing you can find to quell your snack crave is freshly sliced cucumber slathered in hummus, you'll never have tasted anything so delicious. Remember, this isn't about deprivation, it's about replacing empty calories from saturated fats, refined grains and sugars with healthier choices that work in the long run.
3. Shop with a plan (and never on an empty stomach). Take the time beforehand to identify healthier alternatives to your standard snack choices. Those sneaky fat free pretzels are still salty, caloric and of course, processed. With next to no nutrients and little fiber to back 'em up, they don't belong on your top ten list. Switch to crunchy veggie sticks if it's the munch you're after, otherwise snack on dried fruit and nut mix, some three [bean salad](#) or a sprout-filled whole grain ½ pita pocket. Discover your faves and shop accordingly.
4. Forget counting calories, cut out the crap cold turkey (know right now that you can't eat just one Lay's or any other potato chip). If you know you're going to be in a processed food zone anywhere near mealtime, bring your own snacks to carry you through. Keep a snack stash, a

little pack of sprouted almonds or trail mix is a good thing to have on hand when the cupcakes are going around.

5. Tap into your willpower (yes you can!) Research shows that willpower is absolutely something you can develop; you just need to know the tricks. A new book by Stanford psychologist [Kelly McGonigal, *The Willpower Instinct: How Self Control Works*](#) spells out user-friendly methods to uncover your own steely reserves. My top willpower development pick turns out to be the author's most straightforward advice: eat right!
6. Finding it hard to meet your [daily fruit and veggie](#) requirements? Try something new! There are so many creative alternatives to processed once you begin to look. [Sweet potato fries](#) take five minutes to prep, and once you learn how you'll never go back to Swansons. Beans are a healthy, fiber-rich alternative to beef with most of the protein (add rice to round it out) minus the saturated fat, hormones and antibiotics.
7. Stay full of fiber: fresh fruits, veggies and legumes will both keep you satiated and steady those glucose levels for balanced energy that outlasts the competition (processed foods) without the unwanted additives. Processed foods may be stripped of fiber but they retain all the calories, so they whisk through your digestive system, leaving you looking for more before you know it. Not so with whole foods whose fiber keeps you full long after the meal is gone.
8. Trade [pre-sweetened or diet beverages](#) for sugar-free tea, preferably the kind you brew yourself. You'll gain health benefits without the risk associated with high fructose corn syrup or artificial sweeteners. Try green tea for extra antioxidants, ginger tea to sooth the stomach or mint to add a skip to your step. Any way you steep it, tea tops those premade packaged beverages every time.
9. Avoid fast food restaurants. Even most "healthy" menus are laden with sodium, saturated fats and lots of calories. If you don't have time to sit down and enjoy a restaurant meal, bring your own from home and you'll also save a buck! Last night's leftovers always make a yummy lunch the next day.
10. Last but most importantly, remember that changing habits isn't easy. Be realistic about your goals, and recognize that adopting healthier habits is a process too. As best-selling author and health expert [Kathy Freston](#) suggests, when learning a new behavior, sometimes you need to "lean into it" to get the longest lasting results. Clean, green eating is not only the best thing you can do for your body, it's also the most delicious way to go. In other words, however you get there don't forget to enjoy your journey, one health bite at a time.