

SECTION 5

Planning Healthy Meals

You now have the basic knowledge and cooking skills you need to begin to make some major changes in your eating habits. There is much more to learn, of course, but now's the time to put what you know to work. In this section, you'll have a chance to experience what it is like to be on as perfect a diet as possible. We will use a unique method to learn new tastes and break away from bad habits. Along the way, we will also look at what to do when you do not have complete control over the menu, for example, at restaurants or fast-food outlets.

The Three-Week Break

The best and easiest way to try a new way of eating is to take what you might call a "three-week break." That is, select a three-week period and, during this time, build your meals only from the best possible foods while setting aside unhealthy foods completely. At the end of three weeks, see how you feel. If you like how things are going—if you've lost a few pounds and are feeling healthier and more energetic—you can stick with it. If, however, this just doesn't feel right to you, you are free to go back to your old way of eating. Your diet experiment lasts only three weeks, and remembering that fact will help you to give it your all.

Do not do it halfway. Now is the time to jump in and really see what healthy eating feels like. If, instead, you were to just have an occasional healthy, vegetarian meal now and then while continuing to have meaty, cheesy dishes at other times, you would keep reminding your taste buds of the very foods that cause health problems and would never lose your taste for these foods. Let yourself have a clean break and really try healthy foods on for size.

In Section 3, we talked about the common experience of switching from whole milk to skim or nonfat brands to illustrate how quickly we adjust to lighter tastes. Well, now is your chance to lighten up your entire menu. At first, your taste buds might miss fatty foods, but that will soon pass as they come to embrace healthier choices.

Your taste buds have a memory of about three weeks. So whether you are looking to cut the fat from your diet, reduce salt, break a sugar habit, or get to know truly healthy foods, using a three-week break—and really doing it all the way—gives you the momentum you need.

Use the New Four Food Groups

During your three-week break, we'll use the nutrition-planning guide called the New Four Food Groups, which we got to know in Section 1. Let's briefly review these guidelines. Choose foods from these four groups:

- Vegetables: 3 or more servings per day
- Legumes (beans, peas, and lentils): 2 or more servings per day
- Whole grains: 5 or more servings per day
- Fruits: 3 or more servings per day
- Add any common multiple vitamin to ensure adequate intake of vitamin B₁₂

The suggested serving numbers are just suggestions to get you started. Feel free to vary your proportions as you like. One handy way to do this is to let grains fill up about half your plate, vegetables one quarter, and a bean dish the remaining quarter. Let fruit be a dessert or snack. However, if you would like to pile the vegetables high and reduce the grains, that's perfectly fine. Feel free to enjoy more than one type of vegetable at your meal—say, an orange vegetable, such as yams, with a green vegetable, such as broccoli.

Making It Work

A note of caution: Merely *resolving* to eat right doesn't work very well. It's too easy to slip off track. To make sure it really does work for you, you need to do a few things:

First, *plan* what you will eat. Use the form on the next page or any handy sheet of paper (yes, really do it), marking down "breakfasts," "lunches," and "dinners." Under each heading, list foods that meet the New Four Food Groups guidelines and that work for you.

Second, *go out and buy* these foods so they're in your kitchen when you need them.

Third, and most important, *throw away everything else*. If you're threatened by a serious illness, unhealthy foods are not your friends. Get rid of them.

Okay, let's get started. If you're testing out new recipes, expect that some will turn out better than you would have expected and some might have the opposite result. Don't worry. That's what experimenting is all about.

Meal Planning

Breakfasts

Lunches

Dinners

Restaurants and Fast Food

More and more of our meals are served at restaurants, and much of what's on the menu is far from healthy. But that doesn't mean you have to forego dining out. If you're a little choosy about which restaurants you patronize and about what you order when you arrive, you'll find plenty of great options.

For starters, it helps to think international. Restaurants that feature the cuisines of other lands often have a broad range of healthful menu items. For example, at an Italian restaurant, you'll find minestrone, pasta and bean soup, pasta with marinara or pesto sauce, and green vegetables sautéed with garlic. Chinese and Thai restaurants have plenty of savory soups, along with "vegetable" dishes, which are actually main dishes made from tofu, broccoli, spinach, green beans, and other ingredients. You'll also find a great many rice and noodle dishes. Ask them to use their more traditional cooking methods, without the added oil that may Westerners have come to expect. Japanese restaurants serve miso soup, salads, appetizers, and vegetable sushi, all of which are usually very low in fat and delicately prepared.

Mexican restaurants serve bean burritos, which, if prepared without lard and not smothered in cheese, are usually low in fat and free of cholesterol. Indian restaurants always feature many delicious vegetarian choices, from appetizers to desserts. Ask the waiter to skip the dairy products and to be careful about the overzealous use of oil.

At American restaurants and steak houses, you'll find salad bars and vegetarian plates. More and more fast food and family-style restaurants now feature veggie burgers, salad bars, and baked potato bars.

Recommended Recipes

Salad of Color (page 99)

Quickie Quesadillas (page 121)

Breakfast Scramble (page 136)

Berry Applesauce (page 129)

To Do This Week

The 3-3-3 Way to Revamp Your Diet

If you're going to stick to healthy foods for three weeks—or for the rest of your life—you don't have to be a gourmet chef. If you think about it, most of us choose our dinner on any given night from only about eight or nine different favorite meals that make up our culinary repertoires. So, when you're revamping your menu, all you need are eight or nine *healthy* meals that you like. Once you've found them, you've got everything you need.

Try this: Jot down on a piece of paper the names of three meals you already like that contain no animal products and are reasonably low in fat. For example, you might choose pasta with a marinara sauce, a bean and rice burrito filled with grilled vegetables, a garden salad with kidney beans and low-fat Italian dressing, a portabello mushroom sandwich with roasted red peppers, or veggie chili with crackers.

Next, write down three more meals you like that could be easily modified to eliminate animal products and added fat. Examples might include a vegetable stew instead of the beefy variety, a stir-fry with vegetables instead of chicken, a chili made with beans and chunky vegetables instead of meat, or a hamburger using a veggie burger patty instead of the usual patty.

Finally, write down three meals that are new to you that you'd like to try. Take a look at the recipes in the back of this book for ideas and pick out three that appeal to you.

Now, if you have done this exercise thoughtfully, you've found nine meals that are likely to work for you, and you have just solved your problem. There are many other great foods to try, of course, but you are off to a tremendous start.