

Four Ways to Improve Your Diet

By Doug Cooley

Nearly half of all Americans made a New Year's resolution or two heading into 2005. For many, adopting healthier eating habits topped the list.

If you're serious about changing your derelict diet—and losing a few pounds along the way—a resolution can help. A study published in the *Journal of Clinical Psychology* reports that those who pledge to make behavior changes by means of a resolution were 10 times more likely to succeed than those who simply *want* to make a change. Going public and sharing your goal with someone can also bump up your odds for success.

But a commitment to better eating is only the start. You also need to figure out how and what to change. Here are four suggestions that can put you on the right path:

1. Keep a food record

To fix your diet you should understand where it's broken. One good way to do that, says Washington, D.C.-based registered dietician Katherine Tallmadge, is to keep a pencil and notebook handy as you go about your day. For at least a week, record everything you eat, when you eat, and maybe how you feel after you eat.

The exercise can be eye-opening, says Tallmadge, who is also author of "Diet Simple: 214 Mental Tricks, Substitutions, Habits & Inspiration" (LifeLine Press, 2004). By analyzing your eating routines, she says, you can discover both the good habits you practice as well as those that regularly route high-calorie, low-nutrition fodder toward your mouth.

It can also unveil such misguided behaviors as chronically skipping [breakfast](#). "Studies have shown that if you eat breakfast," Tallmadge says, "you eat proportionally fewer calories the rest of the day."

Keeping an ongoing food record while trying to establish better eating patterns can make you accountable to yourself and discourage mindless eating.

And make sure to record one other item: your weight. Climb on the scale at least once a week if not every day, says Tallmadge.

2. Discover vegetables

Mothers have told us from the beginning of time to eat our vegetables. Now it's time to pay attention.

Melanie Polk, a registered dietician and nutrition director for the American Institute for Cancer Research (AICR), says by adding ample amounts of vegetables, fruits, whole grains and beans to your diet you reap a nutritional bonanza. You also benefit from non-nutritive plant chemicals that contain protective, disease-preventing compounds called phytochemicals.

Moreover, recent studies show that consuming plant foods can play an important role in weight loss, says Polk. High in water and fiber and low in "energy density," they create a feeling of fullness without delivering the big calorie load of high-fat foods.

If you suffered childhood trauma from having to face mushy, flavorless vegetables, Polk says cooking techniques today such as roasting and stir frying can help heal those memories. She suggests visiting the AICR web site (www.aicr.org) for recipe ideas.

3. Remove temptations

When retraining your eating habits, [avoiding temptation](#) is a better strategy than trying to resist it. "We're eating machines — that's instinctive," says Tallmadge. "That's why it's important to keep only healthy foods in your home."

Tallmadge recommends purging your home of chips, cookies and other items you don't want to ingest. Then make sure you have nutritious foods around that are easy to grab when you do feel like snacking. One good option is pre-made vegetable soup in your refrigerator that you can quickly heat up. Another is chopped fruit and vegetables that you can dip into humus, yogurt or light ranch dressing.

Also, be ready for the challenges you face outside of your controlled eating environment. "If you know you're going to overeat at a certain event, seriously consider not going," she says.

To avoid feeling deprived, Tallmadge says it's alright to occasionally indulge in the foods you have eliminated yet still miss. But better yet is to find an alternative, non-eating way to treat yourself, such as scheduling a massage.

4. Don't give up

Finally, if you begin to slide into your former eating patterns, refuse to give up and abandon your effort. Persistence is better than perfection.

"Accepting the setback and moving on is the best strategy," says Tallmadge. Tallmadge notes that weight loss studies have shown those who keep weight off and those who regain weight typically have the same number of slip-ups. "Successful people just know how to rebound from them better," she says.

And remember: making a resolution to eat better doesn't mean you have to fight your wayward dining habits all alone. Solicit the advice of nutrition counselors, doctors, or the 92-year-old marathon runner next door if you think they can help you get—and stay—on the right track.