Stride

KEEP ON MOVING | WELLNESS GUIDE | RESEARCH-BACKED

Eat Better, Live Better

5 simple nutrition hacks, each backed by published research and told through one man's 3 p.m. problem.

Say goodbye to confusion. Five evidence-based adjustments, from an NIH feeding trial to the PREDIMED study, that you can start this week.

CHAPTER 1

The Drive-Thru Diaries

> Daniel is 38 and knows exactly what “healthy eating” looks like. He has read the articles. He has downloaded the apps. And yet by 3 p.m. most days he is standing at the office vending machine, wondering why a man who understands nutrition keeps eating like he doesn’t.
>
> “I just need more willpower,” he tells his wife. But what if Daniel’s problem is not willpower at all? What if it is the food itself, and the way his days are set up around it?

Nutrition advice has become so noisy that confusion is the default. This guide cuts through it. We have gathered five adjustments, each anchored in published research, that you can start this week without counting a single calorie.

CHAPTER 2

Hack 1: Choose Food Closer to Its Original Form

In 2019, Dr. Kevin Hall and colleagues at the U.S. National Institutes of Health ran one of the most careful experiments ever done on this question. Twenty adults lived at the NIH Clinical Center for 28 days. For two weeks they were served ultra-processed meals, and for two weeks minimally processed meals, with the menus matched for calories, sugar, fat, fibre and sodium as displayed [1].

+508 calories per day: that is how much more the participants ate on the ultra-processed diet, even though they could eat as much or as little as they liked. They gained about 0.9 kg (2 lb) in two weeks, and lost about the same on the unprocessed diet [1,2].

Participants also ate faster on the ultra-processed diet [2]. Hall called it the first controlled study showing that ultra-processed food can cause people to eat more and gain weight [2]. The classification used here, called NOVA, was developed by Brazilian researcher Carlos Monteiro’s team: ultra-processed foods are industrial formulations of ingredients such as flavourings, emulsifiers and sweeteners, typically engineered to be hyper-palatable and ready to eat [3].

Try this

Swap **one** ultra-processed item a day for a closer-to-nature version: flavoured yoghurt for plain yoghurt with fruit; packaged snack bars for a handful of nuts and an apple; instant noodles for a quick bowl of rice, beans and frozen vegetables.

CHAPTER 3

Hack 2: Fibre Up

A major set of systematic reviews and meta-analyses commissioned for the World Health Organization, led by Dr. Andrew Reynolds, Dr. Jim Mann and colleagues in New Zealand, pooled evidence from 185 prospective studies and 58 clinical trials. People eating the most fibre had roughly 15–30% lower rates of all-cause and cardiovascular death, as well as lower rates of type 2 diabetes and colorectal cancer, with the greatest protection at intakes of about 25–29 grams a day [4]. The average American adult eats far less, roughly 15 grams, according to the U.S. Dietary Guidelines [5].

- **Add before you subtract.** Add beans or lentils to a meal you already eat.
- **Make half your grains whole**: oats, brown rice, whole-wheat bread, barley.
- **Keep fruit visible.** What you see, you eat.

CHAPTER 4

Hack 3: Build a Mediterranean-Style Plate

The PREDIMED trial in Spain, led by Dr. Ramon Estruch, randomised 7,447 adults aged 55–80 at high cardiovascular risk to a Mediterranean diet supplemented with extra-virgin olive oil, the same diet with mixed nuts, or a control diet of advice to cut dietary fat. After about five years, the Mediterranean groups had roughly 30% fewer major cardiovascular events (heart attack, stroke or cardiovascular death) [6].

An honest note: in 2018 the journal retracted the original 2013 paper because of irregularities in how some participants were randomised, and the authors republished a corrected analysis. The corrected hazard ratios were 0.69 for the olive-oil group and 0.72 for the nuts group compared with controls, consistent with the original finding [6,7]. We cite the corrected version. The trial remains the largest randomised test of this eating pattern for heart disease prevention.

- Cook with extra-virgin olive oil as your main fat.
- Eat fish twice a week, and legumes and vegetables daily.
- A small handful of unsalted nuts makes a fine snack.

CHAPTER 5

Hack 4: Fix the Biggest Levers First

The Global Burden of Disease Study, published in *The Lancet*, estimated that poor diet was associated with about 11 million deaths worldwide in 2017, roughly one in five adult deaths. The leading culprits were not exotic: too much sodium, too few whole grains, and too little fruit [8]. That is useful news, because it points you toward the changes with the biggest payoff.

The big lever	A simple move
Too little whole grain	Choose oats, brown rice or whole-grain bread most of the time.
Too little fruit	Put fruit where you reach first: on the counter, in your bag, by your keys.
Too much sodium	Cook more at home; taste before salting; check labels on soups, sauces and deli meat.
Too few nuts and legumes	Add a handful of nuts to breakfast; make bean-based meals a weekly staple.

CHAPTER 6

Hack 5: Make It Automatic

Back to Daniel. His vending-machine habit is a cue-and-routine loop: 3 p.m., a slump, a walk to the machine. Habit research from University College London shows that new behaviours become automatic when they are repeated in a stable context, taking about 66 days on average, and that one missed day does not undo progress [9]. So Daniel did not overhaul his diet. He changed the loop.

> On Sunday he packed five small bags: almonds and an apple. At 3 p.m. on Monday the slump arrived on schedule. This time the walk to the drawer replaced the walk to the machine. By week three he stopped noticing. "It wasn't willpower," he told his wife. "I just stopped making it a decision."

Journalist and author Michael Pollan distilled decades of nutrition science into seven words: *"Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants."* [10] Notice that every hack above is a version of that advice, made practical.

Your 4-week nutrition ramp

Week 1: One swap per day (Hack 1). **Week 2:** Add one fibre-rich food to two meals (Hack 2). **Week 3:** Cook two Mediterranean-style dinners (Hack 3). **Week 4:** Prep a 3 p.m. snack bag for each workday (Hacks 4 and 5).

A quick word on the evidence

The NIH trial was small (20 adults) and short (four weeks), so it shows a mechanism rather than long-term outcomes [1]. The fibre and Global Burden of Disease findings are largely observational, showing associations that are consistent across many studies but not proof of cause [4,8]. Individual needs differ; people with diabetes, kidney disease, digestive conditions or allergies should consult a registered dietitian before major changes.

This guide is for general education and inspiration. It is not medical advice and does not replace care from a licensed clinician or registered dietitian. Talk with your healthcare provider before making significant changes to your diet, activity or routines, especially if you are pregnant, managing a health condition, or taking medication. Characters in the opening stories are composites created for illustration; all research findings are real and cited.

SOURCES

References & Further Reading

Every number in this guide traces back to the sources below. Superscript numbers in the text match the numbered entries. Where a finding comes from observational research (which shows association, not proof of cause), we say so.

1. Hall KD, Ayuketah A, Brychta R, et al. Ultra-processed diets cause excess calorie intake and weight gain: An inpatient randomized controlled trial of ad libitum food intake. *Cell Metabolism*. 2019;30(1):67–77. doi:10.1016/j.cmet.2019.05.008
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4. Reynolds A, Mann J, Cummings J, Winter N, Mete E, Te Morenga L. Carbohydrate quality and human health: a series of systematic reviews and meta-analyses. *The Lancet*. 2019;393(10170):434–445.
5. U.S. Department of Agriculture and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020–2025*. 9th ed. 2020. dietaryguidelines.gov
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7. Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, The Nutrition Source. PREDIMED study retraction and republication: what changed, what didn't, and the big picture. June 2018. nutritionsource.hsph.harvard.edu
8. Afshin A, Sur PJ, Fay KA, et al. Health effects of dietary risks in 195 countries, 1990–2017: a systematic analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study 2017. *The Lancet*. 2019;393(10184):1958–1972.
9. Lally P, van Jaarsveld CHM, Potts HWW, Wardle J. How are habits formed: Modelling habit formation in the real world. *European Journal of Social Psychology*. 2010;40(6):998–1009. doi:10.1002/ejsp.674
10. Pollan M. *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto*. Penguin Press; 2008.

Watch, Listen & Learn From the Experts

- **Kevin D. Hall, PhD** (NIH, NIDDK). Interviews and lectures on ultra-processed food and energy intake; NPR's *The Salt* coverage of the 2019 study (May 16, 2019).
- **Walter Willett, MD, DrPH** and the **Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health**: The Nutrition Source and the Healthy Eating Plate, at nutritionsource.hsph.harvard.edu.
- **Michael Pollan**. Talks and interviews on *In Defense of Food* and *Food Rules*.
- **Find a registered dietitian nutritionist** through the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics at eatright.org.