



3 Simple Shifts

Looking for low-effort ways to eat healthier? These three small adjustments can make a surprisingly big difference in how you look and feel.

By [Catherine Guthrie](#)

Good food, like timeless fashion, needn't be complicated. The secret to eating well with minimal effort is to base your diet on simple, whole foods that contain a wide variety of nutrients — *and* a satisfying range of flavors and textures.

The synergy of nutrients packaged in a single whole food far surpasses anything a single nutrient can offer, says Hana Abdulaziz Feeney, MS, RD, a nutrition counselor at the University of Arizona in Tucson. "If you think one antioxidant is important, think of the hundreds of antioxidants in something as simple as beans. Add in the fiber, and you've far exceeded anything you can expect from almost any other food."



And so it is that by making just three simple food shifts — eating beans more often, emphasizing more healthy fats, and limiting your intake of refined grains in favor of other healthy, complex carbs — you can enjoy an astonishingly wide and powerful range of health benefits. And they can help you drop excess weight, too.

Shift 1: The Benefits of Beans

Beans may come in modest packaging, but they are "humble nutritional gems," says Kathie Swift, MS, RD, the nutrition director for Food As Medicine at the Center for Mind-Body Medicine in Washington, D.C., and creator of [MyFoundationDiet.com](#), a seasonal eating plan based on whole foods. A single serving of beans (½ cup) rivals the amount of protein in 2 ounces of lean meat. Most beans are also rich in fiber, B vitamins, antioxidants, and a host of minerals, including calcium and magnesium.

That said, no two bean types are identical. "Each bean has unique nutritional attributes," says Swift. "Black beans are high in antioxidants, soybeans host the phytochemical family of isoflavones, white beans are potassium-laden, and adzuki beans pack in some carotenoids."

Best of all, beans' goodness comes cheap: Ounce for ounce, they are one of the least expensive sources of protein. And for just pennies a serving, they can help you achieve some very important health goals:

Dodge diabetes. Beans help control blood sugar. In 2009, Canadian researchers analyzed the results of 41 randomized, controlled clinical trials, involving 1,674 people, that measured the health benefits of eating beans, lentils and peas. Their findings, published in the journal *Diabetologia*, concluded that people who regularly ate legumes had steadier blood-sugar levels than people who didn't.

The reason? The high fiber content in beans slows digestion, which slows the absorption of sugars into the bloodstream. As a result, the bean-eaters' bodies were better at moderating sugar levels in the blood, an important factor in helping to prevent type 2 diabetes.

Resist weight gain. Results published in 2008 in the *Journal of the American College of Nutrition* found that bean-eaters had a 22 percent reduced risk of becoming obese compared with people who hadn't regularly eaten beans. The authors speculated that fiber was behind the health benefit, noting that it wards off weight gain by filling you up on fewer calories and keeping blood-sugar levels steady, which staves off food cravings.

Promote proper digestion. Beans are a powerful supporter of good elimination, which in turn helps keep toxicity

and inflammation at bay. “Our ancestors ate up to 100 grams of fiber a day, but most of us today get only 15,” says Beth Reardon, MS, RD, LDN, director of Integrative Nutrition at Duke Integrative Medicine in Durham, N.C.

Beans deliver both insoluble and soluble fiber. Soluble fiber dissolves in water, creating a gel-like substance that helps lower cholesterol and glucose levels. Insoluble fiber doesn't dissolve in water, so it passes through your digestive system relatively intact, which adds bulk to the stool and keeps traffic moving so toxins don't have a chance to build up in your system.

Regulate cholesterol. As noted, soluble fiber absorbs water as well as other things, such as cholesterol and excess sugars, which makes it a boon to heart health. Housed inside a plant's cellular membranes (rather than in the outer shell), soluble fiber forms a gooey, slow-moving gel as it travels through the gut. It gloms onto bile acids inside the intestines and ushers them out of the body, which prompts the liver to pull cholesterol out of the blood to make more bile. As a bonus, says Abdulaziz Feeney, soluble fiber sends feedback to the liver to slow down cholesterol production.

So if beans are so great, why aren't more of us eating them more often? The two main reasons that people avoid beans are texture and digestive distress, says Swift. If beans' texture bothers you, Swift recommends hummus or other creamy bean dips as a great entrypoint. If digestive distress is a deterrent, try adding a 4- to 6-inch strip of kombu (seaweed) to the beans as they cook to make them more digestible, or take an enzyme supplement to assist with digestion. Also keep in mind that as your body becomes accustomed to more fiber, and as your intestinal system gets cleaner, gas-related problems will likely diminish.

Shift 2: Enjoy Healthy Fats

While some fats (namely trans fats) are bad news, virtually all the naturally occurring fats in whole foods are good for you. A lot of folks don't realize that, though, so they've cut most fats out of their diets. They've used refined carbohydrates to fill the void and have experienced cravings, mood swings, chronic disease and weight gain as a result.

It's now widely understood that quick-digesting carbohydrates (like those found in sugar, white bread, white rice and white pasta), not fats, are primarily to blame for obesity, heart-disease, type 2 diabetes and many of the other major health woes we face as a nation.

“I think that because there is such a fat phobia in America, many people are actually deficient in healthy fats,” says Maggie Ward, MS, RD, LDN, nutrition director at the UltraWellness Center in Lenox, Mass.

The solution, says Ward, is to get the majority of your fats from whole foods. Snack on fat-rich nuts and seeds; slice avocado onto salads and sandwiches; enjoy clean, safe fish.

Whole-food sources of fats not only fill you up, so you're less likely to crave that morning bagel or afternoon cookie, but they also help your body get the essential fatty acids it can't make on its own.

Saturated fats from whole-food sources, like grass-fed meats, eggs, poultry and coconut, when enjoyed as part of a nutritious, high-fiber, plant-rich diet, are also good for you. “Saturated fat makes up part of our cell membranes, is needed for hormone synthesis and serves as a great fuel source,” says Ward. “And like all fats, saturated fat really adds satiety to the diet and balances blood sugars.” A 2010 meta-analysis of 21 studies involving nearly 350,000 people found no significant link between saturated fat in the diet and increased risk of heart disease. Those results, published in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, represent a total turnaround from advice given just a few short years ago. (Learn more at [“Heart News.”](#))

Here's what good fats can do for you:

Control cravings. Adding a little fat to each meal or snack can help you stay full longer, and minimize the carb cravings often caused by spikes and dives in blood sugar. “Fat is what adds satiety to a meal,” says Ward. “If you have a little avocado, butter or coconut, that meal is going to stick with you a lot longer.”

Maintaining a good balance of dietary fats in the body also supports healthy metabolism, which is essential to weight loss. Try a handful of nuts in your smoothie, a dollop of full-fat yogurt on berries, or a slice of cheese with an apple.

Douse inflammation. Inflammation is at the root of a host of chronic ills, from heart disease to diabetes to certain cancers. Ironically, fat — long blamed as a contributing factor in such maladies — may actually turn out to

be a significant factor in resolving them. Many experts agree that an imbalance in our fat intake (too many omega-6s from meats and vegetable oils like soybean, corn and safflower oils, and too few omega-3s) are fueling an epidemic of inflammatory diseases. “We evolved on a diet that was close to 1 to 1 (omega-6 to omega-3), and the majority of Americans are now eating closer to 20 to 1 or even 30 to 1,” says Reardon.

Regain balance by cutting the amount of vegetable oils in your diet and upping your intake of omega-3-rich fish, such as salmon, anchovies and sardines, plus fish oils and plant sources such as walnuts and flaxseeds. If you eat meat, give preference to grass-fed and organic options, which are much higher in omega-3 fatty acids.

Build your brain. Omega-3 fatty acids — DHA (Docosahexaenoic Acid), in particular — make up 20 percent of the brain’s gray matter, says Reardon. Inside the brain, our cell membranes are composed of fats that facilitate snappy cellular communication — which is why fatty-acid deficiencies are a common factor in depression, mood swings and compromised brain function.

Shift 3: Go Easy on Grains

Grains are a dilemma. On one hand, unadulterated whole grains, like quinoa, buckwheat, amaranth and millet, are packed full of fiber, macronutrients, micronutrients and phytochemicals. Many studies connect the dots between a diet rich in whole grains and lower rates of obesity, diabetes and even some cancers. But conversely, an honest look at the average American’s grain consumption points to some troubling trends. Most of us eat grains — primarily wheat products — with every meal. And of the more than half-pound of grains we eat every day, less than 1 ounce comes from whole grains.

What Swift calls “nutritionally naked” grains — everything from bagels and cereals to pasta — dominate the American diet. Many experts acknowledge the need for a food shift around grains, especially the disproportionate role of wheat in our diet.

“As a country we are ‘over-wheated,’” says Reardon, who calls it the “crowding out theory.” “Every time you eat another wheat-flour product, it’s a missed opportunity to get a nonwheat grain, like quinoa or buckwheat or, better yet, vegetables, like kale and squash, into your diet,” she says. “It’s time to start thinking more about those near misses.”

The first step is to rightsize the role of grains in your diet, says Swift. “Legumes, vegetables, fruits, and nuts and seeds need to be the foundational elements in building a healthy diet, with whole grains taking a less prominent place at the table.”

The second step is to make the vast majority of grains you *do* eat whole grains — not just whole-grain flours. Abdulaziz Feeney notes that flour-based foods are more likely than intact grains to create many of the same health problems in the body as sugars do, including unwanted weight gain.

“People need to understand the difference between a whole grain and whole-grain flour,” she says. “If all you’re doing is switching from white-flour products to whole-grain breads, spelt pretzels and rice pasta, you’re missing the goodness that more-intact grains have to offer.”

So, should you avoid grains altogether? That’s a matter of a passionate debate.

Since grains are a relative newcomer to the human diet (arriving a mere 15,000 years ago after 2 million grain-free years), some experts argue that the body isn’t well designed to process them. As noted, eating large quantities of grain is widely considered a recipe for weight gain and inflammation. And with an estimated 30 to 40 percent of the U.S. population at least somewhat intolerant to the gluten present in many popular grains, there may be additional reason to avoid them.

That said, for those who tolerate them well, whole grains can be a good source of healthy carbs, antioxidants and fiber — especially for active people in need of a reliable energy supply.

Whether or not you decide to significantly scale back your grain intake, being selective about the grains you eat can help you accomplish a number of healthy goals:

Stabilize blood sugar. Remember that most flour-based products quickly turn to sugars in your body. On the other hand, most intact whole grains (grains that *haven’t* been turned into flour) are much slower to digest, and less likely to cause blood-sugar spikes and dips.

Look for whole-kernel grains like quinoa, amaranth, millet and brown rice. And keep in mind that most whole-grain flour has the same glycemic index as refined flour. The glycemic index (GI for short) of a food is based on how much the food raises blood-sugar levels compared with a standard carbohydrate (usually a marker based on white bread). You can reduce the glycemic impact of the grains you eat by mixing them with fats, proteins or high-fiber vegetables. For instance, a cup of white rice by itself is high on the glycemic index, but top it off with 1½ cups of stir-fried vegetables, some protein and fat, and the overall glycemic load of the meal drops dramatically.

Up your nutrient intake. Eating a variety of grains, rather than eating mostly wheat, gives you a much better range of nutrients. Barley, oats, buckwheat and quinoa are rich sources of both macro- and micronutrients. Most contain vitamin E, several B vitamins, calcium, magnesium, and trace minerals such as copper, zinc, iron and manganese. In addition, the soluble and insoluble fiber found in most whole grains, including oats and barley, can lower cholesterol, reduce inflammation and enhance digestion.

Balance your diet. Grains dominate so many foods (pastas, crackers, cereals and so on), they are easy to overeat. By downsizing your grain intake, you free up plate and stomach space for more variety. A daily serving or two of whole grains isn't a bad thing, but don't let them dominate your meals. "We are eating grains to the exclusion of plants," says Reardon, who recommends nine to 13 servings of vegetables and fruits a day — almost impossible to pull off when grains are hogging all the room on your plate, and in your stomach.