

Healthy without the Headache: Setting and Achieving Realistic Health Goals

“How many calories does my body need?”

“Do I need to be taking supplements every day?”

“Should I be using essential oils for this?”

“How much water should I be drinking?”

“Why is organic food so expensive?”

If you’ve ever asked yourself any—or all—of these questions, you know that health is overwhelming! From regular physical checkups to getting enough sleep, exercising to meal prepping, skin care to dental hygiene . . . the list goes on, and in the end you feel more exhausted than energized.

If you’re looking to adopt some new healthy habits without getting a headache, look no further. We’re here to talk about some small, easy steps you can take to get on track to a healthier you.

Before introducing any new habit into your routine, it’s important to evaluate what your goals are. “Healthy” will look different for each person. Some people may feel great eating a 50 percent carb diet, but other people may need more protein or fat. If you’re unsure about your personal health needs, consult your physician. And it’s always a good idea to talk to your doctor before making any major changes to your lifestyle, such as introducing an extreme exercise routine—better safe than sorry.

If you’re just now jumping on the health bandwagon, be sure to start with small, manageable steps to reach your goals. The last thing you want is to burn out after a week or two—then you’ll be back at square one, or even worse off than when you started. Below are some goals that may be on your mind and some realistic ideas for approaching them.

Weight loss

Even if you have 100 pounds to lose, don’t jump right into a six-days-a-week HIIT program and cut your calories to 1200. While it’s true that the only way to lose fat is to achieve a calorie deficit, it’s always best to take a more gradual—and more sustainable—approach. Instead of eliminating cookies cold turkey, try one or two of the ideas below. Then gradually introduce additional changes as each step becomes a habit.

- **Take a stroll.** Walking is a great first step to adopting a healthy exercise routine. In addition to burning calories and improving cardiovascular health, walking can improve your mood by releasing endorphins. You can start by taking a 20-minute walk three times per week and then build up from there.
- **Get your greens in.** It’s no secret that vegetables are great for our bodies, so aim to eat at least 3–4 servings per day. If 3–4 sounds like a lot, start with 2. (Baby steps, right?) By incorporating a variety of veggies into your daily meals, you will naturally fill up on healthy, nutrient-rich calories and be less tempted to binge on that bag of potato chips. That’s not to say that you’ll never eat a chip again, though—balance is key.
- **Drink up.** Not only is water vital to our bodies, but it can also help us eat fewer calories. Drinking 8–16 ounces of water before each meal will help you reach your daily hydration goals and may help you eat less by filling you up a bit before you eat.

Muscle growth

If you find yourself envying your coeds at the gym for their shredded shoulders and thick thighs, you’re probably lacking a little in the muscle department. Although it takes time—a LOT of time—to achieve

the perfect peach and six pack, there are some things you can introduce now that can get you started with your gains.

- **Lift weights.** It may seem obvious, but we'll say it anyway: If you want to build muscle, you have to do some resistance training on a regular basis. Of course, there are bodyweight exercises that can help, but eventually you'll want to add weight to your routine if you're serious about toning up. Just be sure you don't lift too heavy for your abilities, and always use a spotter if you're trying new equipment or lifting heavier than you're used to.
- **Eat plenty of protein.** Protein is the main nutrient that our muscles are made of—which means we need more of it if we want more muscle. But protein can come from a variety of sources, so if you immediately envisioned eight-ounce steaks for every meal, try thinking outside the barn. Whole grains, vegetables, beans, and nuts are all great sources of protein in addition to animal products.
- **Take a day off.** Your instincts may tell you that in order to get serious gains, you need to be lifting seven days a week. However, this can actually hinder your goals. In order for your muscle fibers to properly grow after a workout, they need plenty of recovery time. Try not to work the same muscle group two days in a row, and make sure you're getting enough sleep at night; 7-9 hours is good for most adults.

Overall wellness

If you're happy with your current physique but want to improve or maintain your overall health, take note of the areas below that you could improve in. These tips will help you continue in your health journey for the long haul!

- **Adapt as needed.** As your goals or health needs change, your habits may change as well. That's okay! Part of living a healthy lifestyle is being flexible and adapting to your situation as different needs arise. Don't be afraid to re-evaluate your goals and make changes to your routine from time to time.
- **Strike a balance.** You don't have to swear off cookies or exercise two hours every day to be healthy. Many people choose to eat healthy 80-90 percent of the time and indulge the other 10-20 percent. Practicing a balanced diet and moderate exercise program will be the most practical way to achieve long-term health goals.
- **Plan ahead.** Sometimes life throws curveballs at us, but a little planning can go a long way. Meal prepping can save money and make healthy eating more convenient. Piles of Tupperware not your thing? Try prepping just one meal for the week (e.g., breakfast) or a few simple snacks instead. Having wholesome options at your fingertips can often make the difference between a healthy decision and an unhealthy one.

Ultimately, your goal should be to make lifestyle changes that you can sustain . . . you know, for life. If you can't see yourself counting calories or giving up pizza until the day you die, then why start now? It may help you reach a short-term goal, but it's not going to contribute to your lifelong wellness if you're going to "relapse" after a few weeks or months. Most importantly, find what works for *you* and what you can sustain long term. Every little bit will help you climb the ladder to the healthiest you possible!

This article is not meant to replace the counseling of a health care provider.