



FOOD SECRETS THAT CHANGE LIVES

LESSON 1

The Fundamentals of Healthy Eating



PART 1

The 5 universal principles of good nutrition, according to science.

Yes, nutrition is often confusing, uncertain, and hotly debated.
But these principles are indisputable—and often transformative.

By [Ryan Maciel, RD, PN2, CSCS](#) and [Alisa Bowman](#)

Is wine bad for you?

Sure, some research cautions about an increased risk of cancer. It's also clearly not something you want to drink before using a chainsaw or driving a minivan.

And some people abuse it.

Then again, wine comes from grapes, which contain health-promoting phytochemicals. And some research points to a potential heart benefit, albeit a small one.

What's more, you (or your client) might be a person who has the ability to enjoy it responsibly and in moderation.

So the answer is... it depends.

You could say the same about a wide range of different foods, diets, and nutritional strategies.

That's because, when it comes to nutrition, there's a lot we don't know for sure.

Which can make it pretty hard to give cut-and-dry answers on what to eat for better health.

But your clients don't want to hear "it depends" and "we need more research" every single time you open your mouth.

They want real guidance.

That's why they hired you, isn't it?

So what nutrition concepts can you really be confident about?

Well, almost everyone agrees on five evidence-based principles.

And we're pretty sure about one more.

Plus, there's a reliable process you can use to evaluate everything else. (More about that at the end of this lesson).

But before we get into what we know with almost 100 percent certainty, let's explore why and how we know it.

How many studies does it take to confirm a nutritional claim?

We can't answer that question with a specific number.

Truth is, nothing in science is ever completely certain. But we can get pretty darn close by weighing five main factors.

#1: Quantity

How much research is there? Only a few studies? Or hundreds?

The more vast the body of research, the more confident you can feel about a specific finding or theory.

#2: Quality

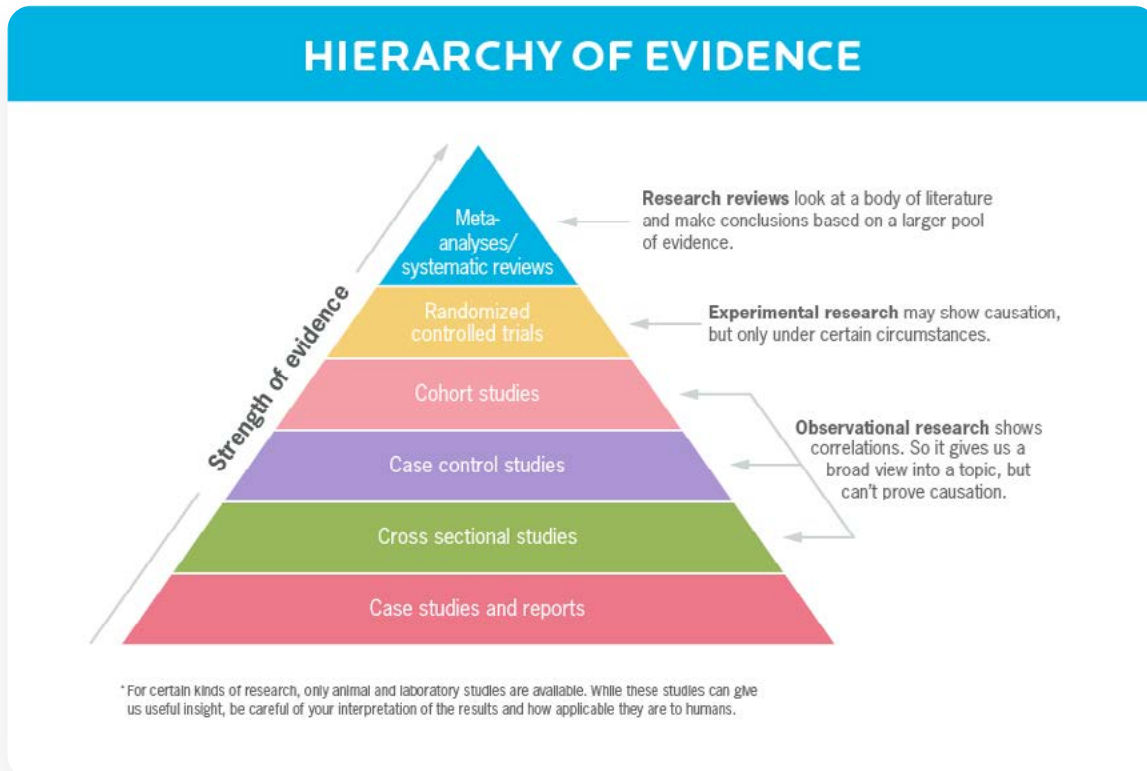
We look for research conducted by people at the top of their field and published in **well respected, peer-reviewed journals**.

Specifically, we want to see:

Randomized controlled trials that test a specific treatment on a group of participants. Another group of people (the placebo group) doesn't get the treatment. But both groups think they're getting it.

Systematic reviews that discuss the available studies on a specific question or topic. They use precise and strict criteria for what's included.

Meta-analyses that use complex statistical methods to combine the findings of several studies. Pooling together the data from many studies increases the statistical power, offering a stronger conclusion than any single study.



#3: Scope

We look for research that dates back decades rather than studies that just started appearing during the past few years.

#4: Consistency

Our confidence goes up when many studies arrive at the same conclusion rather than opposite ones.

#5: Universality

Studies have looked at how a nutritional concept affects different types of people, under different conditions, in different geographic locations.

(For a deeper dive into all of this, here's our guide on [how to read scientific research](#).)

5 universal principles of good nutrition

So which nutrition claims pass the five-factor test?

Let's explore.

Principle #1: Weight changes come down to one key equation.

Everyone knows this one, though not everyone believes it. It's the energy balance equation, also known as calories in, calories out (or CICO for short), and it looks like this:

$$\text{[Energy in]} - \text{[Energy out]} = \text{Changes in body stores}$$

In other words:

When you take in more energy (or calories) than you burn, you gain weight.

When you take in less energy than you burn, you lose weight.

When you take in the same energy as you burn, you maintain.

So you might be wondering: How do we know this with absolute certainty whereas “wine is bad/good for you” is still up for debate?

First, like gravity, this principle is easy to test. With gravity, you can continually release a heavy object. No matter how many times you try it, the object falls.

It's the same with energy balance. If you reduce "energy in" and increase "energy out," you always get the same result: Bodyweight goes down.

Second, the energy balance equation comes from the first law of thermodynamics: **Energy can neither be created or destroyed, only transferred from one state to another.**

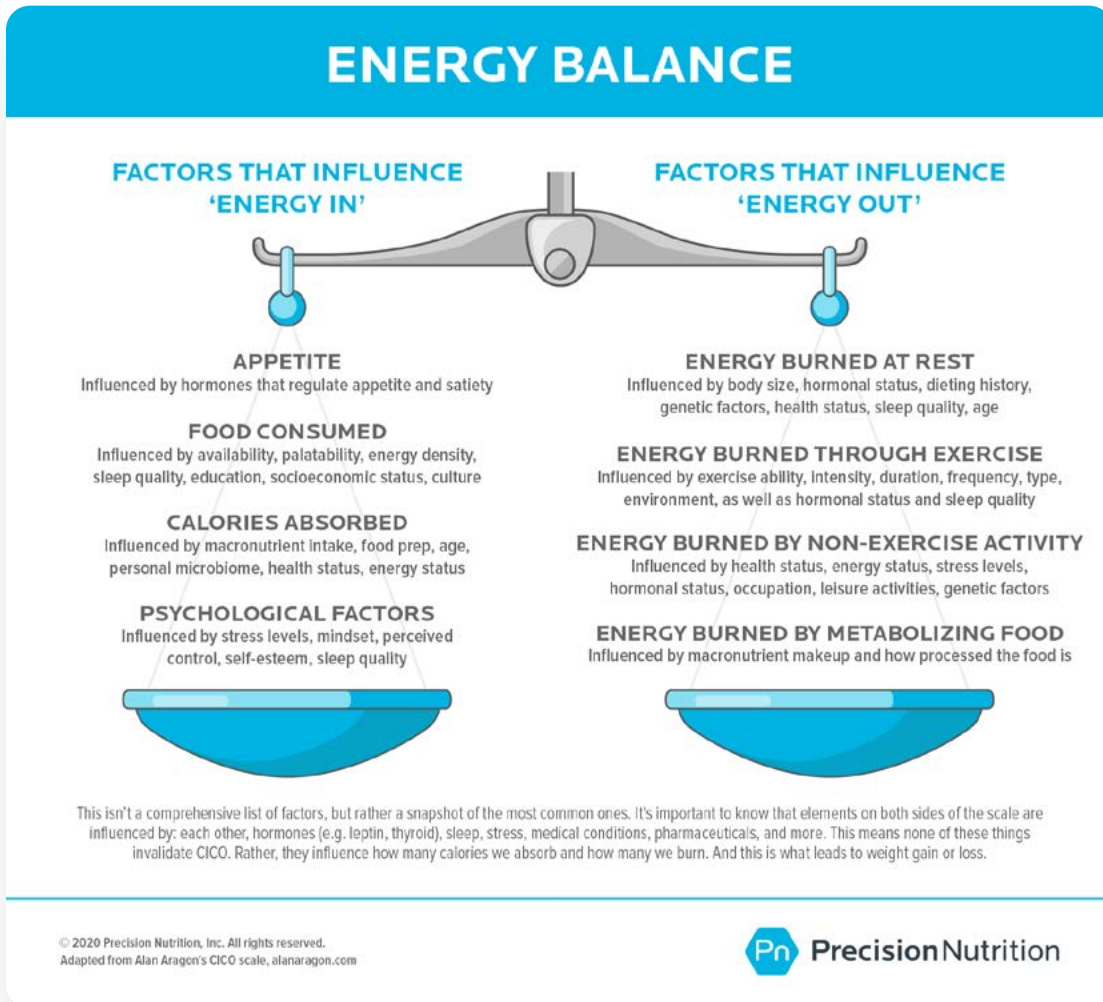
Humans can't create energy from nothing. We convert it from food. And any excess energy we take in doesn't magically vanish: Your body either increases "energy out" (often by turning up the metabolism) or stores the excess.

Scientific laws are as close to facts as we can get. Can they be updated over time? Sure. In this case, however, the law has stood firm for well over a century.

So, why do some people say "Not all calories are equal!"?

In a word: confusion.

As you can see from the illustration on the next page, many complex factors influence "calories in" and "calories out." Your brain, especially, can turn up or turn down metabolism, exerting a massive influence on "calories out."



To better understand the universality of energy balance, let's circle back to another law you may have studied in physics class: the law of gravity.

Like energy balance, it's also represented by the equation $F = ma$ (force equals mass times acceleration). The basic equation applies to every object, dropped from any height. But a lot of factors affect it—like air resistance—making it seem like it's not true.

Similarly, with food and humans, the basic equation never changes. It's true of all foods consumed in all situations.

But, lots of factors can affect different parts of the equation.

What does this mean for you?

If someone wants to gain or lose body mass, they’ll want to consider overall energy balance and how to shift it in their favor. Here are a few ways to do just that. (For a deeper dive on this, check out our [resource on calories in, calories out](#)).

To reduce calories in:	To increase calories out:
Consume more fiber-rich vegetables to reduce the number of calories your body absorbs.	Add cardio to burn more calories.
Consume more protein to reduce appetite and therefore overall energy intake.	Add strength training to build more muscle, boost overall metabolism, and burn more calories.
Eat slowly so you can tune into hunger and fullness signals, and stop eating when you are satisfied, not stuffed.	Increase daily activity by taking the stairs, parking farther from your destination, and/or using an activity tracker to nudge you to take more steps.
Use hand portions to guide how much you eat.	Boost protein intake to increase the thermic effect of digestion.
Get enough sleep to reduce hunger and cravings for sweets.	Practice self care to reduce stress and improve sleep—both important for a healthy metabolism.

Principle #2: Protein is the most important macronutrient to get right.

Why? Two reasons.

Reason #1: It helps you eat less, without feeling so hungry.

Research consistently shows that protein helps you feel full longer and, as a result, lose weight.

That's, in part, because it takes longer for the body to break down protein than carbs or fat.

Protein also stimulates the release of satiety hormones in the gut.^{1,2}

So when you eat protein, you naturally tend to eat less.

And it makes a big difference. Doubling your protein intake could help you to spontaneously consume 400 fewer calories a day. For reference, that's roughly the number of calories in 1 ½ cups of ice cream.³

Test the power of protein for yourself.

On one day, eat 6 to 8 ounces of plain skinless chicken for every meal. Then track your hunger for the rest of the day, rating it once an hour on a 1 to 5 scale.

The following day, eat 1 ⅔ to 2 cups of cooked pasta for each meal. Again track your hunger on a 1 to 5 scale.

Then take a look at your data to see which method resulted in higher hunger ratings over the course of the day.

Reason #2: Protein makes it easier to build and maintain muscle.

Without adequate protein, our bodies just can't function well. We need amino acids (protein's building blocks) to produce important molecules like enzymes, hormones, neurotransmitters, and antibodies.

So when we don't eat enough protein, our bodies plunder it from elsewhere, like our muscles, resulting in muscle loss. This is especially true if we're eating fewer calories than we're burning.

On the flip side, a high-protein diet seems to maximize muscle protein synthesis, which should lead to more muscle gain for people who are strength training and consuming enough calories.

This is probably one of the reasons high-protein diets are better for improving body composition than normal or low-protein diets.

A review of 38 studies found that, for people who are out of shape, consuming extra protein won't magically build any muscle—no surprises there. But for people who are really pushing themselves in the gym, eating more protein seems to boost their results, helping them gain even more muscle.^{4,5}

What does this mean for you and your clients?

The right amount of protein for each person varies on a number of factors such as age, gender, and goals.

Someone interested in packing on muscle for a bodybuilding competition might aim for as many as 50 grams of protein (or about two palm-size portions of meat) at every meal. Someone hoping to work off 20 extra pounds is going to need much less than that.

[Our free calorie and macro calculator](#) can help you determine the right

amount of protein for yourself or a client. Just plug in your info, and it'll show you how to use hand portions to get enough protein (and carbs, fats, and calories) to meet your individual goals.

Principle #3: As food processing increases, nutrient density decreases.

Minimally-processed whole foods (such as grains, nuts, eggs, and fish) contain a vast selection of vitamins, minerals, phytonutrients (plant nutrients), and zoonutrients (animal nutrients).

Though we're still unraveling exactly which nutrients do what, a wealth of research consistently points to one resounding conclusion:

Humans are healthier when they consume more whole foods and fewer refined ones.

This is probably because the greater the degree of processing, the higher the likelihood that a food:

- ✓ **Has lost nutritional value**, such as fiber, essential fatty acids, vitamins, minerals, phytonutrients, and zoonutrients.
- ✓ **Has gained additives**, preservatives, fillers, sugar, sodium, unhealthy fats, and/or refined starch.

This is a lot easier to see when you compare specific whole foods to their more highly-processed equivalents.

As you can see on the next page, the less-processed steak and potato dinner contains about 350 fewer calories and a fraction of the sodium as the fast food burger with fries, as well as a heck of a lot more protein, fiber, and other nutrients.

BENEFICIAL NUTRIENTS

FAST FOOD BURGER WITH FRIES

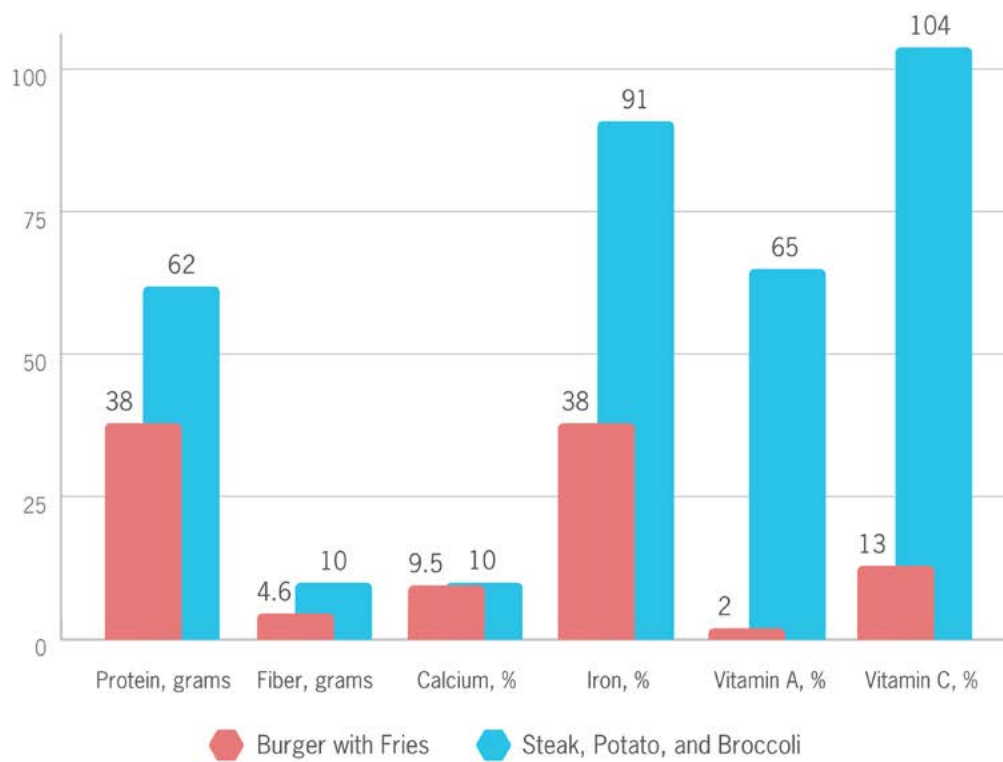


918 calories / 1012 mg sodium

6 OUNCE TENDERLOIN, MEDIUM BAKED POTATO, 2 CUPS STEAMED BROCCOLI



562 calories / 108 mg sodium



That's just one comparison.

But you could analyze any whole food along with its more refined counterpart and see similar differences in calories, sodium, and nutrients.

So it makes sense that a diet rich in minimally-processed whole foods can lead to lower rates of heart disease, cancer, depression, and type 2 diabetes, among other health problems. ⁶⁻¹¹

Minimally-processed whole foods are also rich in fiber and/or protein—two nutrients that help bolster satiety. And they tend to have fewer calories per serving than highly-processed refined foods.

Both traits make it easier for us to control our weight.

One randomized controlled trial even found that people ate a stunning 500 more calories per day when they consumed a diet rich in ultraprocessed foods compared to a diet rich in minimally-processed whole foods.¹² That's essentially the equivalent of consuming an extra meal a day.

In fact, minimally-processed whole foods may be what all successful diets share in common.

Recent studies have shown that participants experienced the same amount of weight loss—regardless of carb or fat intake—as long as they minimized their consumption of refined sugars, flours, and other processed foods while emphasizing whole foods like veggies.






















They also experienced similar improvements in blood pressure, insulin, glucose, and cholesterol levels. ^{13,14}

What does this mean for you and your clients?

We're 100 percent confident about the importance of whole foods, but we're also extremely confident about something else:

Progress is much more important than perfection.

So rather than separating foods into “whole” and “not whole” categories, imagine a spectrum. As you can see from the graphic below, as food becomes more processed and refined, it loses a little bit of its nutritional power.

	WHOLE		HIGHLY PROCESSED
GRAINS	 Brown rice	 White rice	 Rice puff cereal
VEGETABLES	 Fresh carrots	 Canned carrots	 Veggie straws
FRUIT	 Apple	 Applesauce	 Store-bought apple muffins
BEANS & LEGUMES	 Black beans	 Canned black beans	 Black bean tortilla chips
MEAT & POULTRY	 Baked whole chicken	 Fried chicken	 Store-bought chicken nuggets
FISH & SEAFOOD	 Fresh, whole shrimp	 Canned shrimp	 Store-bought popcorn shrimp
NUTS & SEEDS	 Shelled peanuts	 Processed peanut butter	 Peanut butter cookies
	MORE NUTRIENTS		FEWER NUTRIENTS

The goal with whole foods isn't to get things "perfect." Instead, focus on making them "just a little bit better."

A rotisserie chicken from the supermarket may not be a pastured, lovingly hand-raised, heritage Chantecler roasted in a high-end convection oven... but it sure beats chicken nuggets.

Principle #4: Fruit and vegetables reduce disease risk—and may help you lose weight, too.

Among the various types of whole foods, produce deserves special mention.

Fruits and veggies are loaded with health-promoting antioxidants, vitamins, minerals, fiber, and phytonutrients.

And a huge body of evidence from the past 20 years definitively shows that consuming more produce can help prevent a wide range of health problems, including diabetes, stroke, heart disease, high blood pressure, and cancer.

For example, by simply increasing vegetable and fruit intake, experts predict that we could prevent 20 percent or more of all cancer cases, and avoid approximately 200,000 cancer-related deaths annually.¹⁵⁻¹⁹

An increasing number of studies also suggest that consuming a diet rich in antioxidant and anti-inflammatory foods such as fruits and vegetables may lower the risk of neurodegenerative disease.²⁰⁻²²

And, when it comes to cognitive performance, food beats supplements. Once nutrients, such as antioxidants, are isolated from produce and inserted into capsules, they seem to lose some (perhaps all) of their power.

Finally, an eating pattern rich in produce can help you more easily control your weight. This effect is thanks to their fiber and water content, which helps fill you up on fewer calories. An entire head of cauliflower, for example, contains only about 150 calories.^{23,24}

What does this mean for you and your clients?

No one fruit or veggie is king. Rather than sticking to one magic powerfood—for example, eating blueberries every single day—aim for a variety. It's best to eat a wide rainbow of colors everyday.

(Got a client who hates veggies? Don't worry! [This infographic](#) will show them how to fall in love with produce.)

Principle #5: Sleep affects what you eat—as well as your overall health.

In coaching over 100,000 clients, we've seen one issue pop up a lot. People can nail everything with their nutrition but still struggle to reach their goals.

Often, that's because they're not getting enough sleep.

And they only make progress once they prioritize sleep.

What's the connection?

If you sleep 5 or 6 hours when you really need 7 or 8, you keep your body in a chronically sleep-deprived state, impairing your body's ability to regulate several key hormones.

- ✓ Ghrelin levels rise, triggering hunger.
- ✓ Leptin falls, so it takes longer to feel full.
- ✓ Endocannabinoids increase, making your perception of foods seem more pleasurable.

End result: You can't keep yourself away from the cookies.²⁵⁻²⁷

By not getting enough sleep, you're just hungrier and you crave sweets more than you otherwise would.

You're also tired, so you exercise and move less.

And more awake time means more time to raid the kitchen.

Bottom line: Sleep-deprived people tend to eat at least 300 more daily calories than people who get enough sleep.²⁸

In addition to interfering with weight loss, lack of sleep erodes health.

Just one night of sleep deprivation can lead to increased blood pressure the following day.²⁹⁻³² Each year, when nearly 1.5 billion people lose an hour of sleep due to daylight savings time, rates of heart attacks jump.^{33,34}

What does this mean for you and your clients?

Most of us just aren't sleeping enough.

Going to bed at midnight and getting up at 6? It's not going to cut it.

For ideas on how to turn things around, check out our article on [improving sleep](#).

Bonus principle: Internal appetite regulation is a game-changing skill... for most people.

People often rely on calorie counting to guide what and how much they eat. And while it can be helpful—serving as an external guardrail that protects against overeating—there's a downside.

When people rely solely on external rules—following strict macros or calorie counts—they tend to lose touch with the internal cues that tell

them when to eat and when to stop.³⁵

And while you might assume people need a strict food tracking method to reach their goals, we just haven't found that to be the case.

This is especially true when they learn to listen and respond to their internal sense of hunger and fullness, a skill known as **internal appetite regulation**. By relaxing, eating slowly, and tuning into their thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations, most people can make phenomenal progress with this one important skill.

Research is starting to back up our clinical experience, too, showing that internal appetite regulation can help people to automatically choose higher-quality foods.^{36,37}

Is more research needed? Perhaps.

But after you've worked with over 100,000 clients, as we have, you start to build a database of collected wisdom. And often, there's stuff that you've just seen enough times to know it's a thing.

Internal appetite regulation is one of those things.

We're so confident about the importance of internal regulation that it's the second skill our coaches teach most clients.

But it doesn't work for every single person universally.

A very small number of people may not be able to effectively tune in to internal signals at all.

For example, people with Prader–Willi syndrome have abnormally high levels of the hunger-hormone ghrelin. They constantly feel excessively hungry when their bodies don't need more calories, so asking them to stop eating when they feel full just doesn't work.

Conversely, some people who are battling cancer rarely feel hungry and might lose too much weight if they didn't use external guidance on when and how much to eat.

But these situations are relatively rare. With practice, the vast majority of people can eventually get in touch with their hunger and fullness signals.

What does this mean for you and your clients?

Sure, there's not as much research behind internal regulation as there is for the five main principles listed above.

But the benefits of internal regulation far outweigh the scientific uncertainty and potential exceptions.

To evaluate other nutritional strategies, answer four key questions.

Beyond the core principles, there's a lot that depends on the individual.

So what do you do when your client asks: How often should I eat? Should I eat breakfast? Is red meat okay? Should I take a multi? Is keto a good diet?

The answers all depend on a lot of variables, such as:

- ✓ Who the client is
- ✓ Their goals
- ✓ Their food preferences
- ✓ Their health, experience level, and any illnesses or injuries
- ✓ Their existing patterns and habits
- ✓ And so much more.

The best diet, for example, depends on someone’s physiology, food preferences, age, health, budget, and personal beliefs.

Universally, nearly everyone benefits from more protein, more produce, and more whole foods (which is why all three are listed under “what we know for sure.”) But the specifics—how often to eat, what foods to eat, how much to eat, which macros to shoot for—will differ from person to person.

So rather than feeling pressured to have a definitive answer at the ready, in these situations, we like to explore four key questions.

Rank the answers to each question on a 0 to 5 scale.

➔ **What’s the level of scientific confidence?** What is the quality, scope, and consistency of the available research? A score of 0 would be least confident, and 5 would be most confident.

Of course, finding the answer to this question requires a lot of digging and reading. You’ll also need a bit of research fluency to understand study design, bias, sample sizes, and so on. If that sounds overwhelming, try examine.com, a site that analyzes research across a wide range of nutrition topics.

If you’re still struggling, know this: Most nutrition topics are relatively uncertain, and we also can’t always wait around for science to prove everything. In the end, the best way to know whether something will or won’t work for a client may be to try it, as an experiment, to see what happens.

➔ **What are the downsides?** How might someone struggle to implement this? What are the financial, social, physical, and emotional costs of trying it? Could it potentially cause harm? A score of 0 would be overwhelming downsides, and 5 would be few downsides.

For example, some of the downsides of intermittent fasting involve hunger and potentially missing out on meals with family. Similarly, choosing to only eat organic foods comes with a financial cost.

➔ **What are the benefits?** What are the upsides of trying this approach? How could it help? What are the likely payoffs in terms of health, energy, mood, and fitness? Could the strategy improve someone's relationships, career, peace of mind, or overall life? A score of 0 would be few benefits, and 5 would be maximum benefits.

➔ **How likely is consistency?** Dietary details matter much less than consistent adherence to a particular practice. Is it possible to stick to this nutritional change 80 percent of the time over several weeks, months, and years? A score of 0 would be not possible, and 5 would be "absolutely can do this."

Now tally up the total.

Based on these ratings, you can then decide whether this is a strategy worth trying (or work with your client to help them decide).

0-10

Reconsider whether this is the best change for you (or your client).

11-15

It's a draw. Only you or your client can decide if the benefits outweigh the costs on this one. Consider trying it for a few weeks and see what happens. Worst case scenario: It's a learning experience.

16-20

Go for it!

No matter how perfectly you use the assessment tool, however, you won't know for absolute certainty whether something will work for

yourself or a client—until you try it.

That’s the nature of nutritional uncertainty. There’s no getting around that.

But, thankfully, you can use each experience to gather data and learn.

And you can also lean heavily into the 6 principles we’ve discussed here. Just those alone will make a huge difference.

After all, how many people do you know who are consistently doing all of these things well?

- ✓ Eating an appropriate amount of calories for their body and goals
- ✓ Consuming enough protein
- ✓ Choosing mostly minimally-processed whole foods
- ✓ Getting lots of fruits and vegetables
- ✓ Sleeping enough
- ✓ Eating slowly and mindfully

No, these aren’t exciting or trendy. But for most folks, simply following these basic principles, most of the time, will get them where they want to be. Plus, if they’re not checking these boxes, they’ll likely have a really tough time with the more “advanced” stuff.

So remember: While nutrition science may not yet have all the answers, it may have all the answers most people really need.

References

- 1 Ghazzawi HA, Mustafa S. [Effect of high-protein breakfast meal on within-day appetite hormones: Peptide YY, glucagon like peptide-1 in adults](#). *Clinical Nutrition Experimental*. 2019 Dec 1;28:111–22.
- 2 Wang S, Wang C. The Effect of Dietary Protein on Weight Loss, Satiety, and Appetite Hormone. Available from: <https://www.actascientific.com/ASNH/pdf/ASNH-03-0207.pdf>
- 3 Weigle DS, Breen PA, Matthys CC, Callahan HS, Meeuws KE, Burden VR, et al. [A high-protein diet induces sustained reductions in appetite, ad libitum caloric intake, and body weight despite compensatory changes in diurnal plasma leptin and ghrelin concentrations](#). *Am J Clin Nutr*. 2005 Jul;82(1):41–8.
- 4 Pasiakos SM, McLellan TM, Lieberman HR. [The effects of protein supplements on muscle mass, strength, and aerobic and anaerobic power in healthy adults: a systematic review](#). *Sports Med*. 2015 Jan;45(1):111–31.
- 5 Schoenfeld BJ, Aragon AA. [How much protein can the body use in a single meal for muscle-building? Implications for daily protein distribution](#). *J Int Soc Sports Nutr*. 2018 Feb 27;15:10.
- 6 Farvid MS, Chen WY, Michels KB, Cho E, Willett WC, Eliassen AH. [Fruit and vegetable consumption in adolescence and early adulthood and risk of breast cancer: population based cohort study](#). *BMJ*. 2016 May 11;353:i2343.
- 7 Srour B, Fezeu LK, Kesse-Guyot E, Allès B, Méjean C, Andrianasolo RM, et al. [Ultra-processed food intake and risk of cardiovascular disease: prospective cohort study \(NutriNet-Santé\)](#). *BMJ*. 2019 May 29;365:l1451.
- 8 Rico-Campà A, Martínez-González MA, Alvarez-Alvarez I, Mendonça R de D, de la Fuente-Arrillaga C, Gómez-Donoso C, et al. [Association between consumption of ultra-processed foods and all cause mortality: SUN prospective cohort study](#). *BMJ*. 2019 May 29;365:l1949.
- 9 Adjibade M, Julia C, Allès B, Touvier M, Lemogne C, Srour B, et al. [Prospective association between ultra-processed food consumption and incident depressive symptoms in the French NutriNet-Santé cohort](#). *BMC Med*. 2019 Apr 15;17(1):78.
- 10 Martínez Steele E, Juul F, Neri D, Rauber F, Monteiro CA. [Dietary share of ultra-processed foods and metabolic syndrome in the US adult population](#). *Prev Med*. 2019 Aug;125:40–8.
- 11 Fiolet T, Srour B, Sellem L, Kesse-Guyot E, Allès B, Méjean C, et al. [Consumption of ultra-processed foods and cancer risk: results from NutriNet-Santé prospective cohort](#). *BMJ*. 2018 Feb 14;360:k322.
- 12 Hall KD, Ayuketah A, Brychta R, Cai H, Cassimatis T, Chen KY, et al. [Ultra-Processed Diets Cause Excess Calorie Intake and Weight Gain: An Inpatient Randomized Controlled Trial of Ad Libitum Food Intake](#). *Cell Metab*. 2019 Jul 2;30(1):67–77.e3.
- 13 Gardner CD, Trepanowski JF, Del Gobbo LC, Hauser ME, Rigdon J, Ioannidis JPA, et al. [Effect of Low-Fat vs Low-Carbohydrate Diet on 12-Month Weight Loss in Overweight Adults and the Association With Genotype Pattern or Insulin Secretion: The DIETFITS Randomized Clinical Trial](#). *JAMA*. 2018 Feb 20;319(7):667–79.
- 14 Shan Z, Guo Y, Hu FB, Liu L, Qi Q. [Association of Low-Carbohydrate and Low-Fat Diets With Mortality Among US Adults](#). *JAMA Intern Med* [Internet]. 2020 Jan 21; Available from: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1001/jamainternmed.2019.6980>
- 15 Wang X, Ouyang Y, Liu J, Zhu M, Zhao G, Bao W, et al. [Fruit and vegetable consumption and mortality from all causes, cardiovascular disease, and cancer: systematic review and dose-response meta-analysis of prospective cohort studies](#). *BMJ*. 2014 Jul 29;349:g4490.

- 16 Hung H-C, Joshipura KJ, Jiang R, Hu FB, Hunter D, Smith-Warner SA, et al. [Fruit and vegetable intake and risk of major chronic disease](#). *J Natl Cancer Inst*. 2004 Nov 3;96(21):1577–84.
- 17 He FJ, Nowson CA, MacGregor GA. [Fruit and vegetable consumption and stroke: meta-analysis of cohort studies](#). *Lancet*. 2006 Jan 28;367(9507):320–6.
- 18 Yokoyama Y, Nishimura K, Barnard ND, Takegami M, Watanabe M, Sekikawa A, et al. [Vegetarian diets and blood pressure: a meta-analysis](#). *JAMA Intern Med*. 2014 Apr;174(4):577–87.
- 19 Farvid MS, Chen WY, Rosner BA, Tamimi RM, Willett WC, Eliassen AH. [Fruit and vegetable consumption and breast cancer incidence: Repeated measures over 30 years of follow-up](#). *Int J Cancer*. 2019 Apr 1;144(7):1496–510.
- 20 Khaw KT, Bingham S, Welch A, Luben R, Wareham N, Oakes S, et al. [Relation between plasma ascorbic acid and mortality in men and women in EPIC-Norfolk prospective study: a prospective population study](#). European Prospective Investigation into Cancer and Nutrition. *Lancet*. 2001 Mar 3;357(9257):657–63.
- 21 Fortune NC, Harville EW, Guralnik JM, Gustat J, Chen W, Qi L, et al. [Dietary intake and cognitive function: evidence from the Bogalusa Heart Study](#). *Am J Clin Nutr*. 2019 Jun 1;109(6):1656–63.
- 22 Preventing dementia: do vitamin and mineral supplements have a role? [Internet]. [cited 2020 Feb 27]. Available from: <https://www.cochrane.org/news/preventing-dementia-do-vitamin-and-mineral-supplements-have-role>
- 23 Bertoia ML, Mukamal KJ, Cahill LE, Hou T, Ludwig DS, Mozaffarian D, et al. [Changes in Intake of Fruits and Vegetables and Weight Change in United States Men and Women Followed for Up to 24 Years: Analysis from Three Prospective Cohort Studies](#). *PLoS Med*. 2015 Sep;12(9):e1001878.
- 24 Guyenet SJ. Impact of Whole, [Fresh Fruit Consumption on Energy Intake and Adiposity: A Systematic Review](#). *Front Nutr*. 2019 May 8;6:66.
- 25 Hanlon EC, Tasali E, Leproult R, Stuhr KL, Doncheck E, de Wit H, et al. [Sleep Restriction Enhances the Daily Rhythm of Circulating Levels of Endocannabinoid 2-Arachidonoylglycerol](#). *Sleep*. 2016 Mar 1;39(3):653–64.
- 26 Hogenkamp PS, Nilsson E, Nilsson VC, Chapman CD, Vogel H, Lundberg LS, et al. [Acute sleep deprivation increases portion size and affects food choice in young men](#). *Psychoneuroendocrinology*. 2013 Sep;38(9):1668–74.
- 27 Schmid SM, Hallschmid M, Jauch-Chara K, Born J, Schultes B. [A single night of sleep deprivation increases ghrelin levels and feelings of hunger in normal-weight healthy men](#). *J Sleep Res*. 2008 Sep;17(3):331–4.
- 28 Al Khatib HK, Harding SV, Darzi J, Pot GK. [The effects of partial sleep deprivation on energy balance: a systematic review and meta-analysis](#). *Eur J Clin Nutr*. 2017 May;71(5):614–24.
- 29 Doyle CY, Ruiz JM, Taylor DJ, Smyth JW, Flores M, Dietch JR, et al. [Associations Between Objective Sleep and Ambulatory Blood Pressure in a Community Sample](#). *Psychosom Med*. 2019;81(6):545–56.
- 30 Aggarwal B, Makarem N, Shah R, Emin M, Wei Y, St-Onge M-P, et al. Effects of Inadequate Sleep on Blood Pressure and Endothelial Inflammation in Women: Findings From the American Heart Association Go Red for Women Strategically Focused Research Network. *J Am Heart Assoc* [Internet]. 2018 Jun 9;7(12). Available from: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1161/JAHA.118.008590>
- 31 Calhoun DA, Harding SM. [Sleep and hypertension](#). *Chest*. 2010 Aug;138(2):434–43.
- 32 Meininger JC, Gallagher MR, Eissa MA, Nguyen TQ, Chan W. [Sleep duration and its association with ambulatory blood pressure in a school-based, diverse sample of adolescents](#). *Am J Hypertens*. 2014 Jul;27(7):948–55.

- 33 Janszky I, Ljung R. [Shifts to and from daylight saving time and incidence of myocardial infarction.](#) N Engl J Med. 2008 Oct 30;359(18):1966–8.
- 34 Sandhu A, Seth M, Gurm HS. [Daylight savings time and myocardial infraction.](#) Open Heart. 2014 Mar 28;1(1):e000019.
- 35 Romano KA, Swanbrow Becker MA, Colgary CD, Magnuson A. [Helpful or harmful? The comparative value of self-weighing and calorie counting versus intuitive eating on the eating disorder symptomology of college students.](#) Eat Weight Disord. 2018 Dec;23(6):841–8.
- 36 Carbonneau E, Bégin C, Lemieux S, Mongeau L, Paquette M-C, Turcotte M, et al. [A Health at Every Size intervention improves intuitive eating and diet quality in Canadian women.](#) Clin Nutr. 2017 Jun;36(3):747–54.
- 37 Richards PS, Crowton S, Berrett ME, Smith MH, Passmore K. [Can patients with eating disorders learn to eat intuitively? A 2-year pilot study.](#) Eat Disord. 2017 Mar;25(2):99–113



PART 2

How to overcome the 8 biggest diet problems, based on 100,000 client results.

These proven solutions will help you transform your body and health.

By [Krista Scott-Dixon, PhD](#) and [MJ Perrier, PhD](#)

“Here’s what you should eat... ”

Tell someone you want to lose weight or improve your nutrition, and this is almost always the first advice you get.

But that’s not, in fact, what the average person says they need the most help with. Not by a longshot.

We know because every year, we ask thousands of new Precision Nutrition clients about their biggest nutrition challenges.

“I don’t know what to eat” doesn’t even crack the top 10.

And year after year, people tend to have the same food frustrations, no matter what new “diet revolution” or “no-fail meal plan” comes along.

You might say that’s human nature. We’d suggest another possibility:

Many nutrition coaches and diet programs don’t focus enough on solving the real problems that prevent people from making progress.

Nor do they help people build the fundamental skills they need to sustain any changes they make.

That’s why we’re sharing these secrets from our own clients.

We’ve analyzed their answers and aggregated them into a snapshot of what truly troubles people. The data here are people’s own descriptions of their real-life nutrition struggles and stressors.

More importantly, we’ve also included real-life strategies—developed, tested, and refined while working with over 100,000 clients—that you (or your clients) can use to face and overcome your healthy eating obstacles for good.

The diet problems that drive people crazy



As you can see, “I don’t know what I should eat” is near the bottom of the list. Yet that’s the nutrition challenge most people—including coaches—obsess over.

Of course, what you eat matters for all kinds of reasons: appetite control, proper nutrition, optimal performance, and so on. But “what to eat” probably isn’t the #1 thing holding you (or your clients) back.

Most people kinda-sorta know what they should be eating.

You’ve probably never said “I really shouldn’t eat this,” right before downing a big bowl of spinach. More likely, you utter those words as you dive headfirst into a bowl of salted caramel ice cream.

If you're looking for a long-term fix to these top-ranking problems, more nutrition knowledge probably isn't the answer. Neither is a meal plan. Or a new set of macros.

No, if you're struggling with your food, eating, and exercise habits, you probably need help with your behaviors, especially being consistent with crucial fundamentals. (We call these "Level 1" practices, and we'll introduce you to them throughout this article.)

According to our incoming clients, their most-pressing nutrition problems boil down to this:

How do they stop overeating and, at the same time, find convenient, practical, and satisfying ways to enjoy foods that best nourish their bodies?

Easy problems to solve? No.

Are they solvable? Absolutely.

With that in mind, here are the 8 biggest nutrition challenges*, along with proven strategies you can use to make better choices, and get better results.

Don't try to tackle all these challenges at once. That rarely works.

Instead, choose just one. Focus on it for two or three weeks.

When you (or your clients) feel ready to take on more, select another area that needs some TLC, and give it your full attention. (We've included links to other resources here to help.)

You can make incredible, lasting progress this way. We know, because we've seen it happen with thousands of real clients.

Now it's your turn.

** We've combined closely-related categories.*

Nutrition Challenge #1:

“I can’t stop stress/emotional eating.”

More than 60 percent of our new clients list emotional/stress eating as a major nutrition challenge. What’s more, over 50 percent say they also “get intense cravings” and “snack when not hungry.”

If you relate, it might be a relief to know you’re not alone. Of course, that’s little consolation when your spoon’s scraping the bottom of a freshly-opened jar of cookie butter.

But what if you realized this behavior occurs...

- ✓ Every time your mom calls?
- ✓ On Sunday nights, when you’re dreading the start of a new week?
- ✓ Whenever you see, smell, or hear something that reminds you of your ex?

In our coaching approach, we call this “noticing and naming,” and it offers us great opportunities to regain control.

Emotional eating and intense cravings are typically part of a pattern of behavior that’s triggered by a specific experience—a thought, feeling, and/or situation.

If you can identify the trigger, you can disrupt the pattern of behavior and make different choices.

We use what we call a “break the chain” [worksheet](#) that helps clients identify their emotional and stress eating triggers. Then, we apply a step-by-step strategy to build alternative actions.

For the complete instructions, read this article: [Conquer your cravings and break the sinister cycle that makes you overeat.](#)

Nutrition Challenge #2: “I don’t plan meals.”

Survey says... 53 percent of both men and women check this box.

But good news: Serious improvement in this area may not be as time-consuming and complicated as it sounds.

Think about meal planning on a continuum.

At the far left: You put zero thought into what you might eat later today or tomorrow or the rest of the week. Most decisions are made after you’re already hungry and while you’re staring at the contents of your refrigerator—or looking at a drive-thru menu.

At the far right: You spend Sunday morning grocery shopping and taking the afternoon to prep seven days of breakfast, lunch, and dinner, packing it away in containers and leaving nothing to chance.

But in between? There’s real opportunity to progress, and it doesn’t require a complicated meal plan. You just need to do a little better than you are now.

A great place to start:

Plan to eat one to two servings (think: an amount the size of your fist) of produce at each meal.

Don’t worry about variety for now: If you like steamed broccoli or raw carrots or sliced cucumbers, you could have those at every meal, if you want. Just practice buying what you need and eating it at breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

And if you find yourself at a restaurant, stick to the plan. That could mean getting a side salad with an order of broccoli instead of fries. (For bonus planning, try checking the restaurant’s menu online before you go.)

You'll be amazed at how this simple approach can transform the quality of your meals, yet it doesn't require a ton of effort.

For more ways to ease yourself into healthy eating, check out:

[Why meal plans usually suck.](#)

Nutrition Challenge #3: “I eat too quickly.”

While this isn't at the top of the challenge list overall, it was the #1 issue for men—with nearly 60 percent of guys raising their hand.

And turns out, these folks are spot-on. Almost everyone benefits from eating more slowly.

In fact, in our coaching method, slow eating is one of the first practices we ask clients to do. The reason is simple: It's incredibly effective.

The act of consciously slowing down—even just taking a breath or two between bites—can help you eat less without feeling deprived.

And we've found it works for everyone from the most advanced dieters to those who've struggled with healthy eating for a lifetime.

We'll explore this practice further in Lesson 3 of this course.

Nutrition Challenge #4: “I have a serious sweet tooth.”

Maybe you love cookies. Or M&Ms. Or anything that's rolled in sugar.

That's completely normal, according to almost 50 percent of our clients.

However, it's typically not just the sweetness that appeals to your taste buds, belly, and brain. It's a diabolically delicious combination of sugar, fat, and salt that makes certain foods nearly irresistible. There's even a special name for them: hyperpalatable.

In fact, food manufacturers use this flavor formula to create products you can't stop eating. (It's great for sales, after all.)

The biggest challenge with these foods is their availability: They're everywhere, including your kitchen.

So, remember Berardi's First Law (named for its originator, Precision Nutrition co-founder Dr. John Berardi):

If a food is in your house or possession, either you, someone you love, or someone you marginally tolerate will eventually eat it.

This also leads to the corollary of Berardi's First Law:

If a healthy food is in your house or possession, either you, someone you love, or someone you marginally tolerate will eventually eat it.

We're not saying you should make sweets off-limits. Instead, shape your environment to set yourself up for success.

What would happen if, next time you visit the grocery store, you bought some fruit for dessert instead of that jumbo pack of Oreos?

Try it, and observe what happens.

To learn more about how to handle hyperpalatable foods, read [Manufactured deliciousness: Why you can't stop overeating](#).

Nutrition Challenge #5: “I eat out a lot.”

With so many temptations on restaurant menus, it’s natural to feel a little tortured about what to order. Once that mental back-and-forth begins, it’s all too easy to say, “Heck with it, give me the carbonara and pass the bread sticks.”

Along with planning meals or your food choices (as in Challenge #2), you can also plan how to show up.

- ✓ Is this a special occasion where you want the freedom to indulge? Is the food so unique and amazing at this restaurant that it’s truly worth it? (If so, slow down and really savor the experience.)
- ✓ Or would you prefer your choice align with your healthy eating practice? (If so, consider preparing in advance by reviewing the menu, or even setting a phone or calendar reminder to help yourself stay on track.)

There’s no right or wrong answer, but deciding ahead of time can help you stay focused and avoid being distracted by a mountain of delicious pasta.

Every time you follow through on your plan, notice how you feel after you’ve finished your meal.

Ask yourself: “Am I just as satisfied as I would have been otherwise?”

If yes, that’s a positive step to encouraging the same behavior next time. (With more practice, smart choices become easier and easier.)

If no, try following these steps:

- ✓ Order a plant-rich dish. (Shoot for half your plate to be vegetables.)
- ✓ Choose a lean protein. (Read: chicken breast or fish.)

- ✓ Avoid breaded and fried foods. (This eliminates a lot of poor choices.)
- ✓ Ask for dressings on the side. (And use responsibly.)
- ✓ Eat slowly. (See Challenge #3, above.)
- ✓ Stop when you're 80 percent full. (See Challenge #6, below.)

These aren't hard and fast rules, but a practical guide for when you're eating out—no matter if you're at a fine-dining establishment or a fast food chain.

Is this your top challenge? Make sure to read [25 ways to eat well on-the-go](#) for additional insights and strategies.

Nutrition Challenge #6: “I eat larger portions than I need.”

In the weight loss industry, it's popular to tell people, “It's not your fault.”

And in this case, it's probably true. Between your parents directing you to “clean your plate,” the abundance of hyperpalatable foods (see Challenge #4), and the mega-meals served by chain restaurants, eating more than you need can feel completely natural.

Which means eating an appropriate-sized meal can feel... completely unnatural. At least until you get you used to it. And that requires practice.

A simple way to start:

Eat slowly (Challenge #3... again), and stop when you're 80 percent full. Do this no matter how much is left on your plate or how uncomfortable it makes you feel.

This won't be easy at first, and you may wonder, "Am I at 80 percent full or 70 percent?" or "Did I just totally mess up and go over?"

Don't worry about it. The point is to become a more mindful eater and pay better attention to your body's satiety signals. That takes time, and like any skill, you'll improve with practice.

We're going for progress here, not perfection.

Of course, it helps to start with a reasonable portion size. But you don't need to enter your meals into a calculator ahead of time. You can use your hands to estimate how you should eat, with our simple but effective [portion and calorie control guide](#).

Nutrition Challenge #7:

"I don't have time to prepare meals."

Are you seeing a theme emerge? Sure, this one's related to "I don't plan out meals" and "I eat out too much." But it's also slightly different because it's specifically calling out the reason why: a lack of a key resource.

Now let's be honest: There may be a lack of desire here, too, at least compared to activities you do have time for. And that's okay.

After all, many people are on the move all day, making a living, commuting, and/or caring for others. You deserve some time to unwind, and if that means grabbing takeout so you can sink into your couch 30 minutes sooner, we get it.

But let's go back to our continuum concept:

- ✓ If you're making zero meals now, could you find time to make one meal each week?
- ✓ Or if you're making three, could you find time to make four?

If you can make just one extra meal, you'll be taking a positive action to change your behavior and improve your health.

That's how real, lasting transformation happens: one tiny step at a time, not by trying to change everything overnight.

So figure out what action you're capable of now—even if it doesn't seem like much—and try it out. Then practice it next week, too. As it becomes easier, ask: “Could I add in another home-cooked meal?”

Remember: Progress, not perfection.

And for more ways to deal with a hectic lifestyle, check out [7 ways to make time for exercise and nutrition](#).

Nutrition Challenge #8: “I drink too much.”

If you're nodding your head right now, we feel you. And so do more than 30 percent of our new clients who say they over-consume alcohol.

But what does “too much” mean? It can be different for everyone.

Maybe you're drinking two or three glasses of wine at night and wondering if you're relying too much on alcohol to take the edge off. Or perhaps you don't imbibe during the week, but drink to excess on the weekend.

Even if you don't have what's considered a “serious” problem, your drinking habits could be affecting your ability to lead a healthier lifestyle—by interfering with your sleep, affecting your judgement (“Hey everyone! Who wants late-night nachos??”), and stimulating your appetite.

Ask yourself: What's one action you could take to feel a little better about your alcohol intake?

- ✓ Could you have two glasses tonight instead of three?
- ✓ Could you drink more slowly, so that one glass lasts longer?
- ✓ Could you have a glass of water between cocktails?

If your alcohol intake isn't destroying your work or family life, you don't necessarily have to slam on the brakes.

Ease yourself into it, and notice how you feel. Better awareness can result in better choices.

For more help and how-to advice, check out:

[Would I be healthier if I quit drinking?](#)

Discover how to help anyone make better food choices—starting now.

If your career path includes coaching people to make lasting change, check out the #1 rated Precision Nutrition Level 1 Certification. It's the most respected nutrition and lifestyle coaching education program in the world—and the next group kicks off soon.

Created specifically for people working in all areas of health and fitness, our self-paced nutrition certification teaches you the science of nutrition and the art of world-class coaching.

Developed over
15 years.

Proven with over
100,000 clients.

#1 recommended
nutrition certification.

Trusted by
professionals.

Whether you're already mid-career or just starting out, this self-study nutrition certification will give you the knowledge, systems, and tools to make real, lasting change with anyone you work with.

Visit [this link](#) for more information.

(Already a student or graduate of the [Level 1 Certification](#)?

Take the next step and check out our [Level 2 Certification](#). It's an exclusive, year-long Master Class for elite professionals who want to take their nutrition knowledge and skills to the highest possible level.)

