

# NAVIGATING NEW YEAR'S NUTRITION



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**As the Christmas season rolls in, bringing with it a whirlwind of parties, presents, and an array of festive foods, it's easy to find ourselves caught in the trap of overindulgence. For many, Christmas is synonymous with culinary excess, a time when our usual dietary restraints are loosened, if not unfastened. But what impact does this seasonal splurge have on our health, and how can we navigate these temptations more mindfully?**

Interestingly, many people recognise the likelihood of overeating during the holidays and pre-emptively plan strategies to mitigate its effects. Some adopt a more relaxed approach to eating and exercise during this period, intending to compensate with stricter regimes in the new year. However, this "I'll start tomorrow" mind-set, while common, often sets us up for failure. Delayed action can lead to a cycle of procrastination and ineffective dieting attempts. The idea of starting afresh with a new diet in January is appealing but usually impractical. This approach can encourage

excessive eating during the holidays under the guise of a pending diet, often resulting in a more challenging starting point for health and weight goals in the new year. Instead of swinging between extremes of overindulgence and restrictive dieting, a more balanced approach is mindful eating. This involves being present and fully engaged with the eating experience, savouring each bite, and listening to your body's cues about hunger and fullness. By doing so, you can enjoy your favourite holiday foods without the guilt of adverse health effects.

## **New Years Resolutions**

The new year often prompts people to start new diets in the hope of achieving a healthy weight. The symbolism of a fresh start makes January 1st a popular date for dieting and re-evaluating eating habits. However, instead of opting for fad diet that promise quick results, it's more beneficial to embrace sustainable, science-based eating patterns.

The Healthy Eating Plate provides an easy-to-follow, science-based guide for creating balanced and nutritious meals. This approach emphasizes the importance of quality and variety in our diet.



## Fruit & Vegetables: Half Your Plate Or More!

Aim to fill half of your plate or more with fruits and vegetables. This not only ensures a high intake of essential vitamins, minerals, and fibre, but also helps in managing calorie intake as fruits and vegetables provide fantastic nutritional “Bang for your Buck” when it comes to calories.

## Whole Grains & Protein: The Other Half

The other half of your plate should be divided between healthy whole grains and proteins. Whole grains provide sustained energy and essential nutrients, while proteins are crucial for muscle repair and growth.

## Healthy Fats

Including good fats, such as those found in olive oil, avocados, and nuts, is crucial for overall health. These fats are essential for nutrient absorption and brain health. At the same time, reducing the intake of sugar-sweetened beverages can significantly cut down on unnecessary calories and sugar.

## How You Eat Matters!

The manner in which we eat is just as important as what we eat. Mindful eating is about being fully present during meals. Mindful eating is a practice that involves being fully present and engaged with the eating experience. It's about noticing the flavours, textures, and sensations of your food, as

well as being aware of your body's hunger and fullness cues. This practice can transform your relationship with food from one that may be based on guilt or restriction, to one that is more about enjoyment and nourishment.

- **Eat with minimal distractions:** Enjoy your meals in a calm environment, free from distractions like TV or smartphones. This helps in recognising your body's hunger and fullness signals more effectively.
- **Savour each bite:** Pay attention to the tastes and textures of your food. Savouring each bite not only enhances the eating experience but also encourages slower eating, which is linked to better digestion and weight management.
- **Listen to your hunger cues:** One of the key principles of mindful eating is to stop eating when you no longer feel hungry, not necessarily when your plate is empty. This helps in avoiding overeating.

## Enjoying Treats in Moderation

The idea of completely cutting out treats and sweets is often an unrealistic and unenjoyable approach to dieting. Instead, allow yourself moderate enjoyment of these foods.

Research has shown that the first few bites of any food are the most satisfying. So, savour those initial tastes without feeling the need to finish the entire portion. This not only helps in controlling calorie intake but also makes the experience of indulging in treats more pleasurable and guilt-free.





## Reducing Processed Foods

One of the most effective strategies for improving your diet is reducing or eliminating ultra-processed foods. In Ireland and the UK, obesity rates have been increasingly rising due to the increase in ultra-processed food consumption. The NOVA scale, a food classification system, categorizes foods based on the extent and purpose of their processing. It divides foods into four groups:

- **Unprocessed or minimally processed foods:** These include fresh fruits, vegetables, grains, meat and milk, which undergo minimal processing like cleaning or freezing.
- **Processed culinary ingredients:** Items such as oils, fats, sugar and salt used to season and cook.
- **Processed foods:** These are relatively simple products made by adding sugar, oil, salt, or other processed culinary ingredients to unprocessed foods, like canned vegetables or cheese.
- **Ultra-processed foods:** This category includes food items that have undergone significant processing and often contain ingredients not typically used in home cooking, like flavourings, colourings, emulsifiers, and preservatives.

In both Ireland and the UK, a direct correlation has been observed between the consumption of ultra-processed foods and rising obesity rates. These foods, often high in sugar, unhealthy fats, and salt, while low in essential nutrients, contribute to excessive calorie intake and poor diet quality. They're designed to be hyper-palatable and addictive, encouraging overeating.

Shifting towards whole foods or minimally processed foods enhances the intake of essential nutrients as these are normally removed during processing or have to be put back in like in the case of "fortified" breakfast cereals.

Whole or minimally processed foods contain more fibre, beneficial for gut health. Because of this eating more whole foods can improve mood and cognitive function. High intake of processed foods is linked to diseases like obesity, diabetes, and heart disease.

Cutting back on these foods can lower these risks. Ultra-processed foods are energy-dense and can lead to weight gain. Reducing their consumption can help in managing and reducing body weight.

## Top Tips

**Awareness:** Start by reading labels to identify ultra-processed foods.

**Gradual reduction:** Slowly replace processed snacks with fruits, nuts, or homemade alternatives.

**Cooking at home:** Home-cooked meals typically contain fewer processed ingredients as you have full control over how your meals are prepared.

**Mindful eating:** Pay attention to how food makes you feel. This awareness can reduce cravings for processed foods.

**Community support:** Engage with friends and family or online groups for support and ideas.

The new year is an excellent time to develop healthy eating habits. This doesn't mean just focusing on eating nutritious foods, but also how and why you eat. It's about creating a balanced relationship with food, where you eat for both nourishment and enjoyment. This might mean choosing a salad over fast food not because it's what you "should" eat, but because you know it will make your body feel good.

This year, try setting a resolution that goes beyond the strict confines of a diet. Resolve to eat mindfully. This means listening to your body, eating when you're hungry, stopping when you're full, and not labelling foods as "good" or "bad". It's about being kind to yourself and understanding that no single food has the power to make or break your health.

