



## Green, Clean and Lean Eating: A Safer, More Sustainable Alternative

by Elizabeth Braun, MS, RD

**W**ith spring fever in the air, it may be a good time to renew your New Year's resolutions, especially those related to good health. Just like cleaning out the closets after a long, dreary winter, revitalizing your body with a few wellness-promoting nutrition adjustments may be just what is needed to welcome a new season. Clean eating is the new buzz word, but don't get the wrong idea — no detox diets or extreme eating are required.

The clean eater's club is all about choosing foods that are natural and wholesome without pesky preservatives, artificial flavors or pesticides while honoring the environment. This is not a diet, but a lifestyle choice that leads to enhanced well-being one meal at a time. If your resolutions involve weight loss, improved cholesterol, blood sugar or mood, don't get discouraged, the clean eating strategies have the potential to promote all of these. Just incorporate the easy tips into your day at your own pace and feel fresh, rejuvenated and positive about yourself and the environment.

**Would my great-grandma have eaten this?** Asking yourself this question will help you to choose minimally processed foods in their most natural state.

Weight loss, more energy and lower risk of chronic disease comes naturally when eating more fresh produce and fewer fats, sugars and calories. Get familiar with labels and ingredients too. Not everything needs to be right out of the ground, but a long list of unpronounceable label ingredients might warrant suspicion. Just be sure to do some research. Some ingredients are natural as well as unpronounceable — *L. bulgaricus* for example; that's just a naturally occurring active culture in yogurt.

**Never be hungry again.** Sounds too good to be true, but making time to eat regularly scheduled meals and snacks does prevent derailing the most healthy eater. Frequent, small meals (think salad size plates) and a few mini-snacks (a handful), boosts energy and increases calorie burning all day while preventing food binges and constant cravings. Try a meal pattern of three small meals and two to three snacks daily instead of skipping meals and eating large amounts at one sitting. As you may have guessed, this requires some planning. Make menus and grocery lists ahead of time then pack a lunch and snacks so you will always have clean eats on the go.

**Hydration station.** Although water should be the primary source of fluids, all of them count toward the recommended 64 ounces daily. For best results when

eating clean, trade sugary, artificially sweetened, and highly caffeinated drinks for plain, preferably filtered, water. Remember to keep an environmentally conscious container on hand. A little lemon peel or cucumber freshens a water beverage. Make red wine an infrequent indulgence while eating clean. More than four ounces daily can negatively affect immunity, sleep patterns and add unnecessary calories. A few cups of green tea may be a better choice. Brimming with cell-protecting antioxidants, new research shows green tea may enhance metabolism and quell the appetite.

**Meat-free Monday.** As part of a green lifestyle, gradually reducing animal products is not only healthy, but eating more plant-based foods reduces your carbon footprint. To sustain our planet, nutrition experts are following Sir Paul McCartney's lead and pushing for the "Meat-free Monday" campaign he started in 2009. It is no secret that the predominantly meat-based diet takes a toll on the environment. The United Nations estimates producing, consuming and eating meat may be responsible for 1/5 of man-made green house gases. As a bonus, anytime you swap plant proteins like beans, nuts and seeds for meat, you decrease saturated fats and calories while increasing fiber and nutrients to keep you full and energized. One meat-free day weekly will reduce the grocery bill while allowing a gradual adjustment toward a more plant-based, but not necessarily vegetarian diet.

**Is organic always necessary?** Diets abundant in fruits and vegetables whether grown organically or otherwise, are healthier than diets without them. Researchers have found significant links between eating produce of any kind (fresh, frozen or canned) and lower incidence of cancer, cardiovascular disease, gastro-intestinal problems and eye health. There is not as strong an association between eating organic foods and disease prevention. However, there is something to be said for organic farming and the focus on more eco-friendly, pesticide-free methods. Clean produce thoroughly before consuming and if you are still wary, buy organic when choosing from the "dirty dozen"\* to keep those icky pesticides in check.

**Farmers are our friends.** Being conscientious with food choices and eating primarily local foods has merit when aspiring to cleaner eating. Frequenting the local farmer's market and purchasing locally produced foods, supports the local economy and prevents draining resources all along the food chain; from harvesting to production to packaging and transporting. Eating fresh fare that is less processed and in season makes clean eating a healthier and more sustainable option for everyone involved.

**Slow down.** Eating clean means never rushing through a meal. Food tastes better when savored and a feeling of fullness takes up to 20 minutes to register. By eating more slowly, overeating is less likely. Simple strategies like chewing more thoroughly, taking sips between bites, using utensils and eating with others allows a meal to progress at a more relaxed pace. Some unintended yet beneficial side effects include improved digestion, better table manners and possibly a better quality of life.

\* The "Dirty Dozen" — apples, celery, berries, peaches, spinach, imported nectarines, imported grapes, sweet bell peppers, potatoes, domestic blueberries, lettuce, kale/collards

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

*Elizabeth Braun, MS, RD is a registered dietitian counseling patients at Grand Rapids Women's Health on a variety of women's health nutrition issues including gestational diabetes, interstitial cystitis, high cholesterol, diabetes and more. She enjoys taking extra time with patients coordinating multiple diets.*