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## Even one small change can lead to healthier eating. Here are six to consider.

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Every new year, diet messages seem to rain down along with the confetti right after the ball drops.

From the blitz of ads to the guilt-laden chatter among friends, you can't escape them. While most diets have been rebranded as "lifestyle" plans, scratch their veneer and you get the same strict rules and body shaming.

With a firm "talk to the hand" held up in the face of all that, I do recognize there is a cultural shift this time of year that makes sense: Coming out of a season that brims with rich foods, sugary desserts and alcohol, we collectively crave an ebb to that flow, a shift to lighter, more nutrient-rich fare, and a focus on fitness.

The problem is, that shift is often framed as repentance, with punishing food rules that are big on promises but are ultimately unsustainable, even damaging.

Instead, consider a different approach: Make targeted, smaller-but-pivotal changes to put yourself on a lifelong path to well-being.

I asked experts at the nexus of food and nutrition to each share one thing we can start today to propel our lives in a healthier direction. This also is the concept behind my new weekly podcast, "One Real Good Thing," where you can listen to extended interviews with each of these experts over the next month or so.

Some of the changes they suggest are shifts in mentality, others are more hands-on, illustrated with recipes, but each is a powerful tool to help you harness the health-minded momentum of the moment in a positive, guilt-free way that will truly stick.

- Approach food as self-care, not self-control

Instead of jumping on another rule-riddled diet this year, Christy Harrison, registered dietitian nutritionist and author of "Anti-Diet" suggests shifting your mind-set to approach food as self-care, not self-control. Ask yourself, "How am I going to help myself feel energized, nourished and sustained and get some balance in my life, but not feel so obsessed by the minutia?"

She calls it practicing "gentle nutrition," where rather than getting caught up in diet culture's moral language of atonement and tight regulations, you look inward to tap into what feels good in your body, considering not just your nutritional needs, but also your sense of pleasure, comfort and satisfaction.

You can think of it as treating yourself with the same care you would a child, with patience and compassion, providing food as a source of both nourishment and joy. It's not something you suddenly achieve, but rather a practice that can ultimately lead to a peaceful, balanced relationship with food.

- Add dark leafy greens

Eating more dark green leafy vegetables is one of the best changes you can make because "they are the healthiest food on the planet," says Tracye McQuirter, public health nutritionist, author of "Ageless Vegan" and founder of the 10 Million Black Vegan Women movement.

Dark green leafy vegetables are packed with nutrients that fight cancer and promote the health of our hearts, eyes, bones, digestive systems, brains and skin, which is why, she says, "the glow is in the greens."

It's not as much of a stretch to add them to your life as you might think. It's as simple as tossing a handful of chopped greens into a tomato sauce or soup, adding a few leaves to your usual smoothie (they won't change the taste of it) or adding a handful to a saute or stir-fry. There's a bounty to choose from, such as arugula, spinach, Swiss chard, kale, collards, mustard greens and beet greens.

Some are mild and soft, whereas others provide a heartier texture and/or punch of pepperiness. And there are many easy greens options in stores now, including prewashed, chopped to frozen. However you do it, adding greens will enrich your life both flavor and nutrition-wise.

- Swap out beef - most of the time

One of the most important changes we can make for both personal and planetary health is to eat less beef, says David Katz, expert in lifestyle medicine and nutrition, president of the nonprofit True Health Initiative and co-author, with Mark Bittman of "How to Eat." Besides being high in saturated fat, "beef is almost off the charts when it comes to food's environmental footprint . . . and there are no healthy, vital people who don't have a healthy, vital planet to call home."

Less is better, he says, but that doesn't mean everyone needs to be vegan. Start where you are, committing to, say, going meatless for one meal a day, or one day per week (as in Meatless Mondays). And/or you could reduce the quantity of meat in your meals by using small amounts to complement more plant-forward foods - like using some beef in a vegetable-forward stir fry or bean-based stew.

"For our personal health, the biggest benefits are achieved if you swap out beef for plant proteins, like beans and lentils."

- Spice up everyday healthy ingredients

When Linda Shiue, chef and author of "Spicebox Kitchen" talks about spices, she leads with flavor, something she says is too often an afterthought in the conversation about healthy food.

Sure, spices have powerful health benefits, with anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties that can help prevent a spectrum of chronic diseases, but she prizes most the way they work to make "healthy food that you want to eat, that's exciting for you, not that you have to eat."

Taking advantage of spices also "helps you rely less on sugar, salt and fat." Spices can transform everyday ingredients with flavors from around the world, providing an infinite source of intrigue and inspiration. But that very scope can be overwhelming to even a seasoned spice explorer.

A good place to start, if you are a beginner, is with the spices Shiue says she uses most often - garlic (fresh or dried), ginger (fresh or dried) and cumin (whole and ground) - which are found in many cuisines globally; plus, smoked paprika, which she calls her "secret weapon" for enhancing the flavor of vegetable dishes, and cardamom, which she often sprinkles in her morning coffee.

If you are already well-versed in those spices but are overwhelmed by the options for branching out further, she suggests narrowing it down to one cuisine you love and exploring its defining flavors.

- Let go of ambition in the kitchen: Good enough is great

The idea of doing less in the kitchen to get healthier might seem counterintuitive considering cooking at home is perhaps the most direct path to eating better, with more appropriate portions, and less salt, sugar and unhealthy fat. But taking our expectations down a notch can actually make developing the habit of home cooking more feasible for the long haul.

Trying to serve a fabulous, "perfectly" healthy dinner for her family every night "became soul-sucking" for Jenna Helwig, author of "Bare Minimum Dinners" and food director at Real Simple magazine. "It wasn't achievable on a regular basis," which is why she says letting go of ambition in the kitchen is one change worth making.

As a culinary professional, she used to turn her nose up at premade sauces and seasoning blends, or precut vegetables, but now she says "I am over dinner guilt," and embraces shortcuts that make everyday cooking more of a pleasure. "I wanted weeknight dinners to be a highlight of the day, not something I dread. . . . If dinner feels like less of a lift, I am more likely to actually cook it instead of ordering in."

So take the pressure off, and enjoy home cooked meals more often knowing "good enough is great."

- Not sure where to start?

Zero in on the one thing here that had you nodding in agreement as you were reading it, or that sparked your curiosity. Or head to the grocery store with the three featured recipes in hand as a launching point.

Once you make a single small shift and realize how good it feels, you'll be inspired to build on that with more, and before you know it those changes will add up to a healthier you.

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Krieger is a registered dietitian, nutritionist and cookbook author. She writes the weekly Nourish column in The Post. Her new podcast "One Real Good Thing" launches Jan. 3 and is available on Apple, Spotify, Google, Stitcher, Amazon, iHeart and Audacy. Find out more about it at [elliekrieger.com/](http://elliekrieger.com/).

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## Balinese Green Apple Salad

Active time: 20 minutes | Total time: 30 minutes

4 servings

This salad looks to the Indonesian island of Bali for a refreshing way to spice up everyday staples - apple, celery and onion. Tossed in a bright, tart lime dressing spiked with fresh ginger and chiles, the salad provides a crisp counterpoint for roasted or grilled proteins.

Extra dressing will pool on the bottom of the bowl; spoon some over whatever else you're having with your salad, such as rice or a protein.

Storage Notes: Fish sauce can be found at well-stocked supermarkets, Asian markets or online.

### INGREDIENTS

#### FOR THE DRESSING

2/3 cup fresh lime juice (from about 5 limes)

1 1/2 teaspoons grated fresh ginger

2 teaspoons granulated sugar

2 teaspoons fish sauce (may be substituted with soy sauce)

2 teaspoons water

2 fresh Thai bird chile peppers or another hot chile, thinly sliced (see NOTE)

#### FOR THE SALAD

1 large or 2 small Granny Smith apples, unpeeled

1/2 small red onion (2 to 3 ounces) or 1 large shallot, thinly sliced

1 stalk celery, finely chopped

1/4 cup roasted peanuts, finely chopped or crushed

### DIRECTIONS

Make the dressing: In a large bowl, combine lime juice, ginger, sugar, fish sauce, water and chili peppers.

Make the salad: Core the apple(s) and cut it into thin matchsticks until you have about 2 cups, adding the cut apple to the dressing immediately to prevent it from browning. Add the onion and the celery and toss to coat. Let sit for at least 10 minutes and up to 1 hour.

Sprinkle the salad with the peanuts and serve family-style.

NOTE: Thai bird chili peppers can be quite spicy. Remove the seeds and membrane to reduce the heat, before slicing; add more peppers for a spicier salad.

Nutrition information per serving (a heaping 1/2 cup) | Calories: 115; Total Fat: 5 g; Saturated Fat: 1 g; Cholesterol: 0 mg; Sodium: 247 mg; Carbohydrates: 17 g; Dietary Fiber: 3 g; Sugar: 10 g; Protein: 3 g

This analysis is an estimate based on available ingredients and this preparation. It should not substitute for a dietitian's or nutritionist's advice.

Adapted from "SpiceBox Kitchen: Eat Well and Be Healthy with Globally Inspired Vegetable-Forward Recipes," by Linda Shiue (Hachette Go, 2021).

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## Chicken Tender Fajitas

30 minutes

4 servings

This skillet of chile-seasoned chicken with peppers and onions served in warm tortillas is a healthful, family-pleasing meal that can be on the table quickly and effortlessly thanks to two shortcuts: chicken tenders, which require no slicing, and a premade spice mix.

This dish was adapted from "Bare Minimum Dinners" by Jenna Helwig, who also is food director at Real Simple magazine. She encourages home cooks to "get over dinner guilt," and embrace shortcuts that make everyday cooking more of a pleasure.

### INGREDIENTS

2 tablespoons canola or other neutral oil, divided

1 pound chicken tenders

1 tablespoon fajita or taco seasoning

2 large bell peppers (any color), seeded and sliced

1 large red onion (12 ounces), cut into 16 wedges

1/8 teaspoon fine salt, plus more to taste

1/4 cup water

8 small flour or corn tortillas, warmed

Sour cream or plain Greek yogurt, for serving (optional)

Hot sauce, for serving (optional)

### DIRECTIONS

In a large skillet (not nonstick) over medium-high heat, heat 1 tablespoon of the oil until shimmering. Add the chicken and fajita seasoning. Cook, tossing with tongs, until the tenders are coated in the seasoning, then spread them out in a single layer in the pan. Cook until browned on one side, about 3 minutes, then flip and continue cooking until cooked through, about 3 minutes more. Transfer the chicken to a plate.

Reduce the heat to medium. Add the remaining 1 tablespoon of oil, the peppers, onion wedges and salt. Cook, tossing occasionally, until well browned and tender-crisp, about 10 minutes. Add the water and, using a wooden spoon, scrape up and incorporate any browned bits on the bottom of the pan.

Use two forks to tear each chicken tender into 3 to 4 pieces and return them to the pan, along with any accumulated juices. Toss to combine.

Taste and season with more salt, if desired. Serve with the tortillas, sour cream or yogurt and/or hot sauce, if desired.

Nutrition information per serving (1 heaping cup chicken mixture and 2 tortillas) | Calories: 492; Total Fat: 16 g; Saturated Fat: 3 g; Cholesterol: 86 mg; Sodium: 546 mg; Carbohydrates: 53 g; Dietary Fiber: 5 g; Sugar: 14 g; Protein: 34 g

This analysis is an estimate based on available ingredients and this preparation. It should not substitute for a dietitian's or nutritionist's advice.

Adapted from "Bare Minimum Dinners" by Jenna Helwig (Mariner Books, 2021).

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## Collards and Quinoa

35 minutes

4 servings

This recipe is proof of how delicious collard greens can be when cooked quickly, until tender but still vibrantly colorful.

In this recipe from "Ageless Vegan" by Tracye McQuirter, they are sauteed with onions and garlic, then tossed with chewy-sweet sun-dried tomatoes and a crunch of pine nuts. Seasoned with a cheesy-tasting sprinkle of nutritional yeast and piled over soft, turmeric-

spiced quinoa, it makes for a satisfying, quick and nutritious meal.

The book, written with her octogenarian mother, Mary McQuirter, is a guide to eating a well-balanced vegan diet, which includes lots of dark, leafy greens.

Storage Notes: Leftover quinoa and collards can be refrigerated separately or together for up to 4 days. Gently reheat until warm or bring to room temperature.

## INGREDIENTS

### FOR THE QUINOA

1 cup (6 ounces) quinoa

2 cups water

1 teaspoon ground turmeric or curry powder

1/8 teaspoon fine salt

1/8 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

### FOR THE COLLARDS

1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil

1/4 medium red onion (2 ounces), diced

4 garlic cloves, minced or finely grated

1 bunch collard greens (10 ounces), stemmed and thinly sliced into ribbons

1/4 cup halved sun-dried tomatoes

1/4 cup (1 ounce) raw pine nuts

2 tablespoons nutritional yeast

1 tablespoon low-sodium tamari

1/4 teaspoon cayenne pepper or dash of hot sauce, or to taste

1/4 teaspoon fine salt, plus more to taste

## DIRECTIONS

Make the quinoa: If the quinoa is not pre-rinsed, place it into a fine mesh strainer and rinse under cold water, shaking off any excess water. In a medium pot over medium-high heat, combine the quinoa and water and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to low, stir the turmeric, salt and pepper, cover and simmer for about 20 minutes, or until the water is completely absorbed. Remove from the heat and fluff with a fork.

Make the collards: While the quinoa is cooking, in a large skillet over medium heat, heat the oil until shimmering. Add the onions and cook, stirring, until softened, about 3 minutes. Add the garlic and cook, stirring, until aromatic, about 1 minute. Stir in the collards and cook until they start to wilt, 2 to 3 minutes (if the pan is dry, add a splash of water to help the greens wilt). Add the tomatoes, pine nuts, nutritional yeast, tamari, cayenne pepper and salt and cook, stirring, until the collards are wilted but still bright green, about 2 minutes more. Taste, and season with additional salt and/or cayenne, if desired. Remove from the heat.

To serve, spoon the quinoa onto a platter or divide among individual plates, and pile the collards on top.

Nutrition information per serving (3/4 cup quinoa and 1/2 cup collard mixture) | Calories: 293; Total Fat: 10 g; Saturated Fat: 2 g; Cholesterol: 0 mg; Sodium: 487 mg; Carbohydrates: 39 g; Dietary Fiber: 8 g; Sugar: 3 g; Protein: 11 g

This analysis is an estimate based on available ingredients and this preparation. It should not substitute for a dietitian's or nutritionist's advice.

Adapted from "Ageless Vegan" by Tracye McQuirter with Mary McQuirter (Da Capo Lifelong Books, 2018).

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