

# Even 1 small change can lead to healthier eating. Here are 6 to consider.

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January 3, 2022 at 12:00 p.m. EST



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,"](#) launching today, 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.” You are in the right place, because [Washington Post Food](#) regularly offers plenty of such recipes to help you along that path, including [Joe Yonan’s Weeknight Vegetarian](#) column.

### **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.

*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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[Stack sweet potato planks with chicken, spinach and peanut sauce for a hearty dinner](#)

[Spinach lasagna soup is a bowl of goodness you’ll want to make again and again](#)