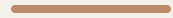


COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE

# Core Food Plan

*A foundational guide to whole-food, root-cause nutrition*



Functional & Integrative Medicine · Justen Watkins, DO



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## Why the Core Food Plan?

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The Core Food Plan (CFP) is designed for those who are interested in:

- Core principles of healthy eating
- Understanding the connection between food choices and health
- Preventing disease
- Awareness of one's relationship with food

The CFP is a first step toward healthier eating, designed to nourish and energize your body. It is based on current research on what and how people should eat to live long, healthy lives. This plan takes elements from the Mediterranean diet and the hunter-gatherer (“Paleo”) approach to encourage eating nutrient-dense, whole foods. A major focus is replacing processed foods with vegetables, fruits, nuts, seeds, legumes, whole grains, anti-inflammatory fats, and high-quality proteins.

This plan can be easily tailored to your personal preferences and health needs. It is available as vegetarian and vegan options and can include foods from virtually any culture. We call it a “core” food plan because it lays the foundations for eating well that will carry you throughout life, using the basic principles of “food as medicine” to support your overall health.

## Features of the Core Food Plan

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This food plan was created with input from a team of physicians and nutrition professionals, supported by evidence from scientific studies. It explains how to eat a balance of healthy, whole foods to create a foundation for long-term health.

### **Foundational eating plan**

This plan meets daily needs for protein, fats, and carbohydrates, and aims to supply all necessary minerals, vitamins, and phytonutrients, along with plenty of fiber and water. The CFP is appropriate for children and adults of all ages. It can be modified for weight loss or gain, to lower blood pressure, to exclude dairy or gluten, or to avoid foods you are allergic, intolerant, or sensitive to. It can also be targeted toward athletes with a focus on foods that fuel performance.

### **Focus on whole foods**

Whole, plant-based foods are the best source of fiber and phytonutrients. Fiber is critical for good health and digestion, aiding the removal of toxins, cholesterol, and waste through the digestive tract, and it is the preferred food of healthy gut bacteria. Phytonutrients are plant compounds with a wide range of health benefits that also give fruits and vegetables their color. Aim for at least one serving of each color of the rainbow every day—think of food as your “multivitamin.”

### **Encourages organic**

Eating organic helps reduce toxin exposure. Conventionally grown food often contains pesticides, insecticides, and herbicides, and processed foods contain artificial colorings, flavorings, additives, and preservatives. Eating organically grown foods whenever possible and limiting processed foods is an important part of a long-term healthy approach.

### **Adequate quality protein**

Every cell in the body contains proteins—they are the building blocks of life, needed to repair and make new cells, support muscle and immune function, and balance blood sugar. CFP protein choices are moderately lean and include both animal and plant foods. Choosing organic, grass-fed, free-range, or wild sources is encouraged; these are lower in toxins and higher in anti-inflammatory omega-3 fats. Include protein with every meal and snack.

## Features (continued)

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### Balanced quality fats

Anti-inflammatory fats from foods like fish, leafy greens, nuts, certain oils, and seeds are featured. A balanced approach to dietary fat includes eliminating trans and hydrogenated fats (typically found in processed foods), decreasing saturated fats from animal sources, and increasing omega-3 fats from fish and plant sources. It is better to replace saturated fat with unsaturated (liquid) fats like olive oil than with refined carbohydrates. Small amounts of saturated fat, such as coconut oil and grass-fed butter, are included.

### High in fiber

The recommended daily fiber intake is around 25 g for women and 38 g for men, yet only about 5% of the population gets enough. Eating whole, unprocessed foods naturally provides more fiber. Insoluble fiber (in the bran of vegetables and whole grains) acts like an “inner broom,” while soluble fiber (in oat bran, barley, nuts, seeds, beans, lentils, and some fruits and vegetables) attracts water, slows digestion, traps toxins and cholesterol, and feeds healthy gut bacteria. Aim for 25 to 35 grams of fiber per day.

### Low in simple sugars

Sugary beverages, processed foods, refined grains, and desserts should be avoided. Removing sweeteners helps minimize inflammation and prevent dramatic spikes in blood sugar and insulin. No more than 1 to 3 teaspoons daily of gentler sweeteners (barley malt, brown rice syrup, blackstrap molasses, maple syrup, raw honey, coconut sugar, agave) should be used. Stevia, lo han, and erythritol can be used as alternatives in very tiny amounts.

### Phytonutrient diversity

Plant foods contain thousands of compounds that communicate with the body’s cells and change how they function. Even small amounts can have dramatic effects—the bitter compounds in arugula, resveratrol in grapes, and astringent compounds in green tea all appear beneficial. The CFP encourages eating six different color groups of plant foods daily: red, orange, yellow, green, blue/purple/black, and tan/white/brown.

## Touring Through the Food Plan

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The CFP food list provides a “snapshot” of healthy foods to choose from every day. Depending on your goals, a daily calorie target may be recommended initially to help you understand portions. As you become more practiced, the quality of foods—rather than calories—becomes the priority.

### Proteins: Plant and Animal Sources

Grass-fed and pasture-raised meats, wild-caught fish, and eggs from free-range poultry are excellent sources of protein and healthy fats. For plant proteins, the best choice is a complete protein from organic sources, like soy—edamame, soy sauce, miso, tempeh, and natto. For those who avoid soy, alternatives include protein powders, legumes, nuts, seeds, dairy, and dairy alternatives.

#### QUICK TIP

*Avoid GMO ingredients by choosing 100% organic for both plant and animal proteins whenever possible. When choosing foods that may not be organic, look for “Non-GMO” on the label.*

**Rule of thumb for portions:** There are about 7 grams of protein per serving (1 oz lean meat, fish, or cheese; 1 egg; ½ cup tofu). A typical meal serving of animal protein (3–4 oz) is about the size of your palm. A fist (¾–1 cup) is the serving for plant proteins like tofu, tempeh, or edamame.

### Tips for including high-quality protein

- Eat lean animal or plant protein at each meal and snack to promote satiety and stable blood sugar.
- Purchase lean cuts of red meat from free-range sources and remove visible fat.
- Use omega-3-rich eggs from free-range hens as a quick protein source.
- Use organic tofu or tempeh in a colorful vegetable stir-fry.

# Legumes, Dairy & Fats

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## Legumes

Legumes such as beans and lentils are a combination food—they contain hearty amounts of both protein and carbohydrates, plus fiber and nutrients like B vitamins, potassium, and magnesium, with very little fat. Protein from legumes, seeds, nuts, and grains usually lacks one or more essential amino acids; combining foods (e.g., legumes with rice) provides a complete set.

### QUICK TIP

*Hummus is easy to make using organic dried or canned garbanzo beans. If using dried beans, soak overnight to shorten cooking and aid digestion. If using canned, rinse first.*

- Spread hummus on a tortilla or in place of mayonnaise on a sandwich
- Use hummus as a dip for vegetables or organic corn chips
- Add black or red kidney beans to salads and soups
- Enjoy edamame as a snack
- Combine beans with quinoa or rice and a rainbow of vegetables

## Dairy and Dairy Alternatives

Dairy and alternatives are a combination food, containing protein, carbohydrate, and fat. Many people do not tolerate dairy, and commercial products may contain antibiotics, hormones, and residues. The CFP encourages organic dairy and alternatives such as kefir, yogurt, and soy, rice, almond, hemp, and coconut milks. Choose unsweetened alternatives. Boxed coconut milk belongs in this category; canned (higher-fat) coconut milk belongs with fats. Look for “BPA-free” packaging.

### QUICK TIP

*Organic, plain yogurt and kefir are a rich source of beneficial bacteria that support digestive health, and should be eaten often.*

# Fats, Vegetables & Fruits

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## Fats & Oils

The CFP includes a variety of anti-inflammatory, minimally processed, omega-3-rich, polyunsaturated, and monounsaturated oils. Use these in small amounts and choose organic when possible. Look for “cold-pressed” or “expeller-pressed” on labels.

## Vegetables

The CFP will help you eat nine servings of phytonutrient-rich foods, including vegetables, per day. One serving of non-starchy vegetables equals ½ cup cooked or raw (the exception is raw greens, where one serving is 1 cup). The goal is to see how many colors you can include each day.

## Fruits

Fresh fruit, ripe and in season, is an easy and delicious way to consume a variety of important phytonutrients, antioxidants, vitamins, minerals, and fiber. As with vegetables, aim for variety and color.

### QUICK TIP

*For generally healthy people, darker-yellow urine usually indicates a need to drink more water, while clear urine (and frequent bathroom trips) may indicate over-hydration.*

## Beverages, Spices & Condiments

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Staying hydrated helps rid the body of toxins, builds resilience to stress, enhances metabolism, and promotes satiety. Drink clean, filtered water throughout the day; needs depend on weight, activity, and climate. Broths, herbal teas, and decaffeinated beverages are good choices. Limit alcohol, caffeinated, and sugary beverages, which dehydrate the body and raise cortisol and blood sugar.

### Tips for improving hydration

- Add a slice of lemon or lime, or a splash of 100% natural pomegranate, cherry, or cranberry juice to water.
- Enjoy a variety of herbal and green teas for variety in taste and nutrients.
- Explore kombucha (fermented tea), being mindful of sugar content.

### Herbs & Spices

Herbs are the fresh leaves of edible plants (cilantro, parsley, rosemary, oregano, thyme); when dried they are called spices. Spices provide high levels of disease-fighting phytonutrients. Avoid fillers like sugar, maltodextrin, gluten, artificial colors, and anti-caking agents. Store in glass in a cool, dark place. Many have therapeutic properties—ginger for nausea and digestion, and anti-inflammatory curry blends with coriander, cumin, fenugreek, red pepper, and turmeric.

- Buy only what you'll use within a few months; store in airtight containers away from heat and light.
- Ground spices keep about a year; whole spices 2–3 years. Rub and smell to test freshness.

## Preferred Condiments

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Most condiments—teriyaki, ketchup, barbecue sauce, glazes—have added sugar, salt, and additives. Read labels, or make healthier versions at home using herbs and spices. Preferred condiments include:

- Apple cider, rice, and balsamic vinegars
- Bragg Liquid Aminos / coconut aminos
- Herbamare / kosher or unrefined sea salts
- Low-sodium organic broths (vegetable, chicken, beef)
- Lemon/lime juice
- Miso (if soy is tolerated)
- Mustards, peppercorns, red chili paste
- Salsa without added sugars
- Tahini, wasabi, wheat-free tamari

## Frequently Asked Questions

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### **What are the core principles of healthy eating?**

Functional medicine starts with food. Food is medicine, connection, information, and energy. Eating a wide variety of high-quality, whole, mostly plant-based foods is powerful medicine that improves health and hinders disease. Nutrigenomics—the study of how food choices affect gene expression—is proving we truly are what we eat. Food is also central to social interaction and provides fuel in the form of macronutrients (protein, fats, carbohydrates) and micronutrients (minerals, vitamins, phytonutrients).

### **Are organic foods really that important to buy?**

With thousands of man-made chemicals in the environment, it makes sense to minimize exposure to pesticides, hormones, antibiotics, herbicides, and GMOs by consuming organically grown food when possible. Save money by buying in season, joining a CSA, or using the EWG’s annual “Dirty Dozen” and “Clean 15” lists to prioritize. To further reduce exposure: wash produce before peeling, peel or remove outer leaves of non-organic produce, soak in a mild vinegar solution, wash hands 20 seconds before and after handling, and dry produce with a clean cloth.

### **How much protein should I eat?**

Most people need about 3–4 oz (palm-sized) of protein per meal; athletes and those pregnant or nursing need more. Quality matters: lean, grass-fed, free-range, organic, non-GMO meat, poultry, and wild fish for omnivores; organic soy, legumes, nuts, and seeds for vegetarians.

## FAQs (continued)

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### **How often is it okay to eat eggs?**

There is ongoing debate, particularly regarding heart disease. For some, one egg per day may be appropriate; for others, egg whites may be best. Some research suggests those with diabetes should have fewer eggs, typically less than one per day.

### **How do vegetarians get enough protein?**

Include legumes, whole grains, green leafy vegetables, seeds, and nuts. Those who eat eggs and dairy get complete proteins more easily. Vegans should include some grains for methionine, an essential amino acid missing from legumes. Examples: 1 egg (7 g), green vegetables (2–3 g), ½ cup tofu (10 g), lentils (9 g), edamame (6 g), 1 cup soy milk (7 g).

### **When do I eat plants raw versus cooked?**

A combination of both is recommended. Those with digestive issues tolerate cooked plant foods better. Steam or use waterless methods to preserve nutrients; lightly cook cruciferous vegetables to preserve their anti-cancer compounds; cook only until tender, not mushy. Cooking increases antioxidant content in carrots, spinach, mushrooms, asparagus, broccoli, cabbage, peppers, potatoes, and tomatoes. Don't pre-soak vegetables, as nutrients are lost in the water.

### **Are frozen fruits and vegetables okay?**

Yes—a great option when cost, time, or availability is an issue. If the food was high quality and fresh at freezing, most nutrients are retained (blueberries, for example, retain phytonutrients). Blanching may lose some vitamin C and B vitamins, but frozen is always preferable to canned.

## FAQs (continued)

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### **Nine servings of fruits and vegetables seems like a lot. How can I do it?**

Here is an example for an 1,800-calorie day:

- 2 servings of fruit (1 cup or 2 pieces)
- 2 servings of leafy greens (2 cups)
- 4 servings (2 cups) of other non-starchy vegetables
- 1 serving of starchy vegetables (½–1 cup)

### **Why are coconut oil and coconut milk on the plan? I thought coconut was bad for cholesterol.**

The goal of the CFP is a healthy variety, which includes fat and oil choices. Avocado and extra-virgin olive oil are two staples for everyday use, and small amounts of saturated fats like coconut oil and grass-fed butter are included as part of a balanced approach.

#### **QUICK TIP**

*Think of the food plan as a flexible framework, not a rigid set of rules. Work with your provider to personalize servings, calorie targets, and any exclusions to your individual needs.*

## Resources & Tools for Success

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The Core Food Plan works best alongside the other tools your provider may give you:

- **Core Food Plan (chart):** your daily food-list snapshot with serving sizes.
- **Weekly Planner & Recipes:** meal ideas and recipes to put the plan into practice.
- **Phytonutrient Spectrum:** guidance for eating a rainbow of colors each day.
- **Diet, Nutrition & Lifestyle Journal:** track how foods make you feel.

Remember that lasting change comes from small, sustainable steps. Start by replacing a few processed items with whole foods, add color to each meal, and build from there. Work with your functional medicine provider to tailor the plan to your goals.

### QUICK TIP

*This guide is for general education and does not replace individualized medical advice. Talk with your provider before making significant dietary changes, especially if you have a health condition.*