



THE INSTITUTE FOR
FUNCTIONAL
MEDICINE®

VERSION 12

Elimination *Diet*



Comprehensive Guide

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Why the Elimination Diet?



Health concerns that have failed to respond to other treatments may improve after completing IFM's Elimination Diet. Specific foods may be related to a long list of health conditions, including digestive problems, headaches, chronic sinus drainage, low energy, depression, mood swings, eczema, skin irritations, joint aches, asthma, weight gain, and others.

Many suffer from these symptoms for long periods of time without realizing the connection to food. It isn't until a food is eliminated from the diet, that the connection with symptoms can be made. IFM's Elimination Diet firstly removes common food triggers, then helps you identify specific foods that may be causing ongoing symptoms through a personalized food reintroduction.

After the three-week elimination period, a personalized food reintroduction is the next step. Reintroduction involves adding back one food at a time to observe whether that food causes symptoms. Foods that continue to cause symptoms (physical, mental, or emotional) are avoided for an additional three to six months, then reintroduction is attempted again. Once the body has healed, some foods which initially caused symptoms may be tolerated and added back into the diet.

The Elimination Diet is a short-term food plan. Healing the gut and being able to eat a wide variety of whole foods are the ultimate goals of the Elimination Diet. A diet with a wide variety of whole foods helps ensure that your body gets all essential nutrients, and this is especially important for anyone interested in improving their overall health.

Your functional medicine practitioner will advise you on the duration of the Elimination Diet. Typically, the Elimination Diet is followed for three weeks. Shorter time periods may not yield the same results, as the body needs time to clear its reactivity to foods that are triggering symptoms. Initially, symptoms may worsen for a short time (rarely more than a few days) due to withdrawal from foods commonly eaten. Transient reactions may be experienced in the first four to seven days as the body adjusts to different foods. These reactions can include changes in sleep patterns, fatigue, lightheadedness, headaches, joint or muscle stiffness, and changes in digestion. Such symptoms rarely last for more than a few days and will vary from person to person.

Features of the Elimination Diet

Identifies food triggers: Food reactions are frequently overlooked as a cause or contributor to chronic health issues. Many people don't realize that food can be related to how they are feeling until common "food triggers" are removed from the diet. Some reactions are considered to be food **allergies**, which cause severe symptoms immediately after a trigger food is eaten. Some reactions may be delayed by hours or even days; this type of reaction is referred to as a food **sensitivity**. Food sensitivities are usually the result of an imbalance in the digestive system that affects the immune system. Food **intolerances** can be the result of reactions to certain chemicals in food (e.g., MSG, nickel, histamine). Food intolerances can also occur when a person lacks an enzyme, such as lactase which is needed to digest milk.

Some food reactions may occur when the same food is eaten frequently. If a person keeps eating foods they are sensitive to, digestion and absorption may be impaired. The Elimination Diet is a useful tool for identifying food triggers, whether it is a true allergy, intolerance, or sensitivity.

Reduces inflammation: Any type of food reaction can trigger low-grade inflammation in the gut, causing the intestinal wall to break down. This exposes undigested food particles into the blood (a condition referred to as "leaky gut"). Leaky gut can allow other substances like bacteria, chemicals, and yeast to leak from the intestine into the bloodstream, further stimulating the immune system and causing more inflammation. Just as food reactions can lead to leaky gut, the reverse is also true; leaky gut can significantly increase the likelihood of food sensitivities. Removing food triggers decreases inflammation and helps calm the immune system.

The intestinal lining is made of cells that replace themselves approximately every two to four days. In the span of a single week, every cell in the intestinal lining is broken down or sloughed off and a new cell grows to take its place. Removing inflammatory and trigger foods, while at the same time supplying the body with anti-inflammatory foods, makes the newly-formed gut tissue stronger and healthier. The Elimination Diet helps to reduce inflammation with anti-inflammatory foods. Eating these foods while eliminating common food triggers lowers inflammation and helps the gut heal.

Supports healthy microbiome: Much of a person's overall health is determined by the health of their gut. As much as 70% of the immune system is clustered around the digestive tract. The gut immune system is constantly monitoring food that passes through the digestive tract. The way the immune system responds is impacted by the flora that inhabit the gut. The normal flora, also referred to as the microbiome, help regulate the immune response.

When the gut is inflamed, the amount of healthy versus unhealthy bacteria in the microbiome can shift. This can impact the immune system and cause unwanted symptoms. Providing essential nutrients for healing is an important factor in creating a healthy microbiome as well as a healthy immune response. Eliminating certain foods decreases inflammation, which allows the gut, and ultimately the

Features of the Elimination Diet

immune system, to heal. Additionally, a healthy gut microbiome can be rebuilt by eating healthy whole foods, especially those high in protein, phytonutrients, probiotics, and prebiotics. These foods are the basis of the Elimination Diet.

Dairy-free, gluten-free: Gluten and dairy products are omitted on the Elimination Diet because they are frequently associated with food reactions. The milk sugar, or lactose, in milk and in many other dairy products can cause painful gas, bloating, and digestive upset, especially in those who lack adequate lactase, the enzyme needed to properly digest lactose. Lactose intolerance is very common throughout the world.

Fermented dairy products like yogurt and sour cream can be naturally lower in lactose, but these products contain casein, a milk protein that can also cause adverse reactions. There are different types of casein in milk, depending on the type of cow, and this too may impact tolerance. Researchers are investigating the role these casein proteins play in allergies, intolerances, and intestinal permeability. Until science clarifies the debate surrounding the different types of casein, all dairy products are avoided while on the Elimination Diet.

Gluten is a family of proteins found in common grains (barley, rye, and wheat) and grain products (breads, cereals, crackers, pastas, etc.) made from these. Proteins in gluten called gliadins can break down the nutrient-absorbing cells in the small intestine. This breakdown can cause leaky gut and can contribute to food sensitivities, food intolerances, and other digestive disturbances or autoimmune conditions. Some people respond well after gluten is removed from the diet, even in the absence of the usual digestive symptoms associated with gluten intolerance.

Dairy products and grains that are avoided on the Elimination Diet are shown in the table below. All products containing these foods as ingredients are also excluded from the plan.

Dairy Products	Grains (gluten-containing)
Butter	Barley
Cheese (all)	Bulgar
Heavy cream	Oats*
Half and half	Rye
Ice cream	Seitan
Kefir	Triticale
Milk	Wheat (farro, kamut, spelt, and all other varieties)
Sour cream	
Yogurt	

*Oats, even those that are labeled gluten-free, are often processed in the same facility as gluten-containing grains and can become contaminated during processing. Some people with celiac disease and gluten intolerance may have a reaction to certified gluten-free oats. For this reason, your should follow your practitioner's advice when reintroducing oats back into your diet.

Features of the Elimination Diet

Phytonutrients to heal the gut: The Elimination Diet contains a wide variety of colorful vegetables and fruits. These plant foods provide a wide range of important nutrients, called phytonutrients, that promote healing and detoxification. These phytonutrients also provide protection against cell damage and play an active role in reducing inflammation.

Reduces toxic burden: The Elimination Diet encourages eating organic foods to lower the toxic burden in the body. It also encourages grass-fed, pasture-raised, and free-range sources of animal protein, as they are higher in healthy omega-3 fatty acids than their corn-fed and caged counterparts. Eating organic reduces your exposure to artificial colorings, flavorings, sweeteners, additives, and preservatives, along with pesticides, insecticides, herbicides, and other chemicals.

While there is emphasis in this food plan on reducing the exposure to toxins of all kinds, the elimination of toxins already present in the body is equally important. Many different nutrients are required to support detoxification. A shortage of any one of them could result in an increased toxic load. Eating whole plant foods will help lower the body's overall toxic burden and support digestive regularity. Drinking plenty of water is also important for the removal of toxins.

A person's toxic burden is a result of three main factors:

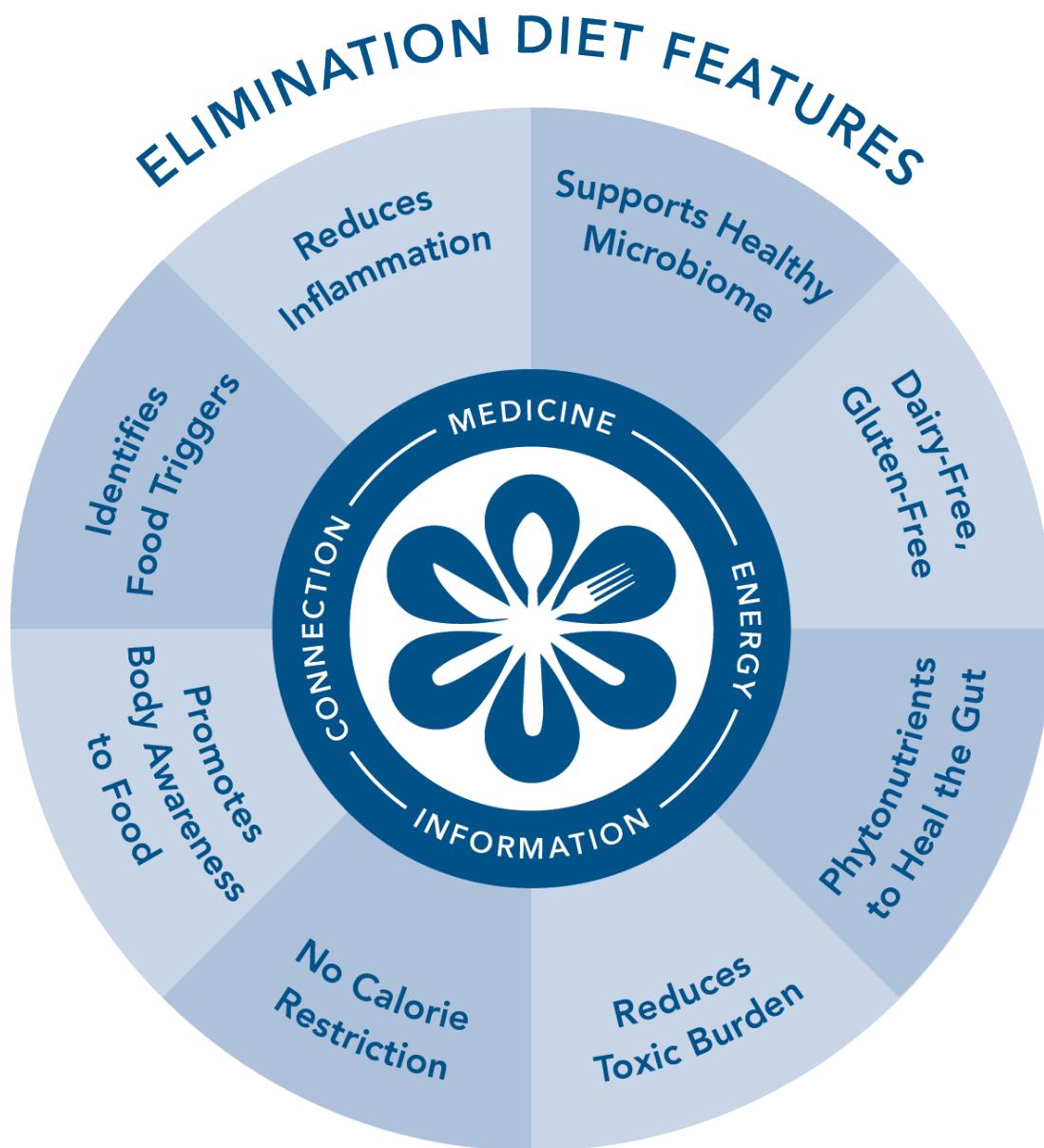
1. Genetics: Your genes may impact how your body clears toxins.
2. Toxins: Everyone's exposure to toxins is different depending on your diet, lifestyle, work, and where you live.
3. Diet: Whole foods and fiber will support the body's ability to eliminate toxins.

No calorie restriction: Weight loss is not a goal of the Elimination Diet. Weight loss may (or may not) happen as the body begins to heal. Although tracking food intake may be helpful, especially during the reintroduction phase, calorie counting is not required when following this food plan. However, it is essential that only the foods that appear on the Elimination Diet food list are eaten during this plan.

Promotes body awareness to food: After the initial phase of the Elimination Diet, you will "challenge" certain foods during the reintroduction phase. This helps identify any specific food triggers that may continue to cause symptoms. During the reintroduction phase, many people develop an increasing awareness of how specific foods make them feel. Being on the Elimination Diet can lead to changes in taste buds and a greater level of awareness about food and the body's reaction. Symptoms that are currently a problem are likely to improve during the Elimination Diet, although there can be an initial period of worsening symptoms. As foods are carefully reintroduced into an eating plan, you may connect symptoms experienced prior to the Elimination Diet with specific foods. Some people report feeling much more in touch with their body's responses to food after the Elimination Diet.



Features of the Elimination Diet



Touring Through the Food Plan

The Elimination Diet Food Plan provides a snapshot of the foods that are available to choose from every day.

To be successful in following the Elimination Diet, it is very important to know which foods to avoid and which foods are okay to eat. The table below provides a summary.

Foods to Avoid	Foods to Eat
<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Alcohol■ Beef■ Chocolate■ Coffee, soft drinks, energy drinks, tea■ Corn■ Dairy products■ Eggs■ Gluten-containing grains (all varieties of barley, rye, spelt, wheat)■ Peanuts■ Pork■ Processed meats■ Shellfish■ Soy and soy products■ Sugar (white sugar, high-fructose corn syrup, brown sugar, sucrose, etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Dairy alternatives■ Fish■ Fruits (only those specifically listed)■ Game meats■ Gluten-free whole grains (amaranth, buckwheat, millet, quinoa, rice, teff, etc.)■ Healthy oils■ Legumes (except soy, peanuts)■ Nuts (except peanuts)■ Poultry■ Seeds■ Vegetables



Touring Through the Food Plan



Protein

Protein is an essential cornerstone of optimal nutrition. It performs multiple functions in the body, such as helping to balance blood sugar level. The body cannot effectively eliminate toxins without amino acids—the building blocks of protein—that bind to toxins in the liver and help the body remove them. Thus, it is extremely important to include some protein in every meal or snack.

The Elimination Diet offers different sources of animal and plant proteins. As with the other food categories, quality is important. High-quality proteins include lean, pasture-raised, grass-fed, organic, and non-genetically modified (GMO) sources. Options include low-mercury fish like halibut, herring, mackerel, salmon, and sardines. Wild-caught, sustainable fish choices are preferred, as some farmed fish contains harmful chemicals. Other protein options include wild game (buffalo, elk, lamb, venison), and poultry (chicken, Cornish hen, turkey). Vegetarian protein choices include spirulina, legumes, lentils, peas, and select protein powders (hemp, pea, and rice).



Legumes

Legumes, such as beans and lentils, are a perfect source of quality protein and complex carbohydrates, which give a sense of fullness and balance blood sugar. At least one serving of legumes on a daily basis in soup or as cooked beans, dips, or hummus is recommended.

Dairy Alternatives

Dairy products are not included in the Elimination Diet, as dairy is often associated with digestive symptoms. Additionally, toxins and hormones are present in many dairy products. There are several dairy alternatives available in this food plan, mostly in the form of milks made from nuts. Dairy substitutes like coconut (boxed variety), almond, flaxseed, or hazelnut milk often contain added sweeteners or gums, so it is important to read food labels before purchasing. Unsweetened coconut kefir is included in the food plan because of its prebiotic and probiotic potential, which may help improve gut and overall health.

Nuts & Seeds

A variety of nuts and seeds are included in the Elimination Diet. They can be added to meals for a nutrient and flavor boost—perhaps sprinkled on top of salads or vegetable dishes—and make a great snack choice. Studies have shown that regularly eating nuts improves risk factors for heart disease. It is recommended that at least 1 to 2 servings of nuts be eaten every day. Raw, unsalted nuts are preferred. Flaxseeds and hemp seeds can be ground and stirred into smoothies or sprinkled on salads. Additionally, nut butters like almond butter, cashew butter, and tahini (sesame seed butter) can be used as condiments, spread on fruit, or drizzled over vegetables.

Many people are allergic or sensitive to nuts. Your functional medicine practitioner may recommend a modified version of this food plan if allergies or sensitivities to nuts are known or suspected.

Touring Through the Food Plan

Fats & Oils



A large selection of fats and oils can be used for salad dressings and cooking while following the Elimination Diet. Choices include minimally refined, cold-pressed, organic, non-GMO fats and liquid oils, as these will be the best quality. Consuming these high-quality fats on a daily basis is recommended for reducing inflammation, which is important for gut health. Extra-virgin olive oil is an excellent choice. Research has shown that extra virgin olive oil supports both heart and liver health. The health benefits of olive oil are also found in whole olives, which are included in this category.

Canned coconut milk is included in the "fats and oils" category because it is predominantly a source of fat, unlike boxed coconut milk, which is primarily a source of protein and carbohydrates. However, most metal cans are lined with a chemical called bisphenol A (BPA), so look for BPA-free cans when buying canned coconut milk, or purchase the boxed version instead.

Another high-quality fat included in the Elimination Diet is avocado oil. Unlike many other plant-based oils that are pressed from the plants' seeds, avocado oil is pressed from the fruit itself. In addition to being good sources of high-quality, healthy fat, avocados and their oils are nutrient-dense and antioxidant-rich.

Ghee, or clarified butter, is also included in this category. While ghee is technically a dairy product, all milk proteins are removed in the process of making it. The butter used for making ghee should be organic and come from grass-fed cows.

Sesame oil is included in the Elimination Diet for its therapeutic role in liver function and anti-inflammatory effects. Other fats included in this category include almond oil, flaxseed oil, hempseed oil, and walnut oil.



Fats and liquid oils can be damaged by heat, light, and oxygen. Liquid oils should be stored in tightly-sealed, tinted glass (not plastic) containers and kept in a cool, dark area. They should not be kept near the stove and should be discarded if they smell rancid.

Non-Starchy and Starchy Vegetables

The Elimination Diet emphasizes eating plenty of colorful vegetables every day. Ideally you should eat at least nine servings of colorful, phytonutrient-rich plant foods a day, mostly comprised of vegetables.

Cruciferous vegetables are a fantastic choice while on the Elimination Diet. Cruciferous vegetables, which include broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage, kale, bok choy, and arugula, contain nutrients that support the body's detoxification systems.

It is important to eat a "rainbow of colors" each day. All colors of vegetables provide a wide variety of impressive health benefits. While darker-colored plants are generally higher in phytonutrients, even vegetables from the white and tan family have powerful health benefits.



Touring Through the Food Plan



Fruits

Phytonutrient-rich fruits help reduce inflammation and protect cells. Eating a piece of fruit may be helpful when you have the desire for something sweet. It's always better to eat fruit with a little bit of protein, such as nuts or nut butter, to offset any blood sugar spikes. Fruit can be fresh or frozen, but avoid those with added sugars or sweeteners.

The Elimination Diet includes fruits that offer a wide range of health benefits, including blackberries, blueberries, kiwi, pomegranate seeds, strawberries, and raspberries. Berries are anti-inflammatory, and they are especially beneficial for brain and heart health. Kiwi has been shown to be helpful for digestion and promoting healthy bowel movements. Pomegranate seeds are anti-inflammatory and heart healthy. The phytonutrients in apples have been shown to support blood vessel health. Apples may be eaten raw or stewed with cinnamon for added flavor. Small amounts of dried fruit are acceptable on occasion; you could also make your own dehydrated, non-sweetened fruit to eat. As with vegetables, purchase organic fruit whenever possible.

While citrus fruits are included in the Elimination Diet, your functional medicine practitioner may recommend that you temporarily avoid these fruits in cases of a known or suspected sensitivity.

Gluten-Free Grains

Gluten and gluten-containing grain products (breads, cereals, crackers, pastas, etc.) are omitted from the Elimination Diet. Removing the gluten-containing grains is just the first step, however, as gluten is also commonly found in prepared sauces, dressings, seasonings, and many other foods.

Gluten-free whole grains, those with an intact bran outer coat, are allowed on the Elimination Diet as they provide an excellent source of fiber and phytonutrients. Whole grains have been shown to be anti-inflammatory. These grains include amaranth, buckwheat, kasha, millet, oats, quinoa, rice, and teff.

Cross-contamination is an issue with oats and potentially other gluten-free grains when those grains are grown near wheat, rye, or barley. It is also an issue when gluten-free and gluten-containing grains are processed using the same machinery. When purchasing oats, look for the certified gluten-free seal on the package. Those with celiac disease need to ensure that gluten has been omitted entirely from daily eating.

Touring Through the Food Plan



Beverages

Hydration helps promote healthy bowel movements, enhances metabolism, and promotes satiety. Drinking water throughout the day has also been linked to improved mood, energy, and cognitive performance. It is important to drink plenty of clean, filtered water throughout the day.

In addition to filtered water, broths (vegetable, bone), meat stocks, and other decaffeinated beverages like fresh, raw, cold-pressed vegetable juices are also good liquid choices. Decaffeinated teas are also recommended on the Elimination Diet.

Coffee, energy drinks, alcohol, soft drinks, and non-dairy creamer are omitted from the Elimination Diet. While not high on the list of potential allergens, coffee and other caffeinated beverages can be a food trigger for some. Caffeinated beverages can cause adverse reactions, such as headaches and digestive upset. However, eliminating caffeine may lead to having headaches or other symptoms. One strategy is to slowly lower caffeine intake over several days to minimize headaches, fatigue, or other symptoms often associated with caffeine withdrawal.

Alcohol is omitted because it is inflammatory, and it has a negative effect on liver function. Both artificially sweetened and regular soft drinks should also be eliminated for the duration of the Elimination Diet. Try substituting seltzer water with lemon or lime wedges, or a splash of coconut water.

It is important to avoid non-dairy creamer, as it contains refined sugars and unhealthy fats. Instead, use one of the non-dairy milk substitutes like almond or coconut milk in place of milk and creamer.

Spices and Condiments

All herbs and spices are great choices while following the Elimination Diet, as they contain a variety of beneficial nutrients and provide flavor to meals. As specific examples, turmeric is also known for its anti-inflammatory and pain-relieving properties, and ginger has been used as a traditional medicine across the world due to its beneficial effects on digestion.

Most condiments available on store shelves are not permitted on the Elimination Diet, as they can contain added sweeteners and preservatives. However, homemade versions of many condiments—including ketchup and barbecue sauce—can be easily made using few approved ingredients.

Store-bought mustards (Dijon, stone-ground, etc.) made without added sugars are permitted, as are vinegars (raw apple cider vinegar, balsamic vinegar, and white vinegar). Note that condiments should be used sparingly.



Touring Through the Food Plan



A Note about Sweeteners

Certain sweeteners, in very small amounts, are acceptable on the Elimination Diet: brown rice syrup, blackstrap molasses, pure maple syrup, raw honey, coconut sugar, agave nectar, lo han guo, erythritol, and stevia. Use no more than three teaspoons daily of all sweeteners combined. Note that stevia is a high-intensity sweetener that requires no more than a pinch for maximum sweetness.

What Not to Use: Artificial sweeteners, table sugar, and other processed sweeteners are not advised on this program. Many sweeteners, like high fructose corn syrup (HFCS) and corn syrup, are derived from corn, which is eliminated on this program. Overall, high-intensity sweeteners can increase the desire for sweet-tasting food and make it difficult to enjoy the natural sweetness of fruits and certain vegetables.

A Note about Chocolate

While cocoa has health benefits in an otherwise healthy diet, all cocoa products like hot cocoa and chocolate are typically not included on the Elimination Diet because of their caffeine content. Your functional medicine practitioner can advise you on whether cocoa is appropriate for you when following this eating plan.

Touring Through the Food Plan

The following is a list of substitutions while on the Elimination Diet.

When you want this...	...eat this
Milk (for cereal or shakes), yogurt, cheese	Milk substitutes: unsweetened rice, oat, hemp, almond, sunflower, hazelnut, and coconut milk; unsweetened coconut yogurt or kefir; read labels to ensure substitute is lactose/casein-free
Hot cereal, such as Wheatena or other hot cereal	Oatmeal or steel-cut oats, rice cereal, quinoa flakes, or Apple Cinnamon Amaranth Porridge*
Cold cereal	Puffed rice and millet, crispy brown rice, amaranth cereals; all labeled gluten-free (note that there tends to be corn in foods labeled gluten-free)
Bread, crackers, & pasta	Gluten-free breads, crackers, or pasta made with brown rice, oats, teff, millet, quinoa, amaranth, tapioca, buckwheat, sorghum, potato flour, and garbanzo bean flour; cellophane noodles from bean threads; check labels for gluten-free with acceptable sweeteners
Quick breads	Chia Seed Applesauce Bread*, Pumpkin Oatmeal Pancakes*
Breading	Grind any allowable rice crackers or bread, or use almond meal (any nut meal), ground chia seeds, coconut, or coconut flour
Eggs	Store-bought egg-replacer, or blend 1 Tbsp. flax meal or chia seeds in blender with ¼ cup water and allow to thicken for a few minutes
Peanut butter	Nut butters made from almonds, cashews, macadamias, walnuts, hazelnuts or pumpkin and sesame seeds (tahini)
Ice cream	Various brands of rice or coconut-based frozen desserts; read labels carefully for approved sweeteners
Soft drinks	Sparkling or mineral water, mixed with a squeeze of lemon or lime, or with a small amount of your favorite juice (¾ water, ¼ juice); filtered or purified water with slices of lemon or lime; unsweetened coconut water
Coffee/tea	Herbal teas
Butter or margarine	Coconut oil or ghee (clarified butter)
Sugar & sweeteners	Unsweetened apple butter, brown rice syrup, blackstrap molasses, pure maple syrup, raw honey, coconut sugar, agave nectar, lo han, erythritol, and stevia.
Condiments	All types of vinegar, all spices, including salt, pepper, basil, carob, cinnamon, cumin, dill, garlic, ginger, mustard, oregano, parsley, rosemary, tarragon, thyme, turmeric, etc. Be sure to read labels! Mustard, for example, sometimes contains wheat.

*Recipe to be provided in another handout

The Reintroduction Process

The Food Reintroduction Process

To identify potential food triggers, foods that seemed connected with symptoms (“challenge foods”) should be reintroduced into the diet, one at a time in two-day intervals.

1. On the first day of the reintroduction phase, choose whatever food is missed the most or craved the most, or was eaten most often. The order of reintroduction of foods is not critical. You can pick the order in which to reintroduce foods.
2. Eat a generous amount of that food throughout Day 1 (two or three average-size portions), while continuing to eat foods on the Elimination Diet. During that day and the next (Day 2), record any symptoms on the Food Reintroduction Symptoms Tracker (available from your functional medicine practitioner).
3. If there is no reaction to the food during this two-day period, keep that food in the food plan and reintroduce a second food on Day 3. Watch for any symptoms on Day 3 and Day 4. If there is no reaction, keep that food in the diet and add the third challenge food, and so on.

If any food provokes symptoms, stop eating that food immediately, wait until the symptoms clear, and reintroduce the next food. After testing all of the challenge foods, try the food again using the same procedure (one day of eating the food and noting symptoms during the following two-day period).

Foods to Reintroduce

On the Elimination Diet, wheat, dairy, soy, corn, peanuts, eggs, beef, pork, and shellfish are omitted. After testing these foods, begin to challenge the remaining foods that were avoided such as barley, rye, coffee/tea, alcohol, chocolate, and any other foods that your practitioner suggested avoiding.

The Reintroduction Process

For each food, identify and eat a pure form containing no additives or ingredients that have been eliminated, such as sugar or preservatives. The following are examples of pure foods from each of these food categories.

Foods/Group	Challenge Food (Examples) and Average Portion Size
Wheat/gluten	100% whole wheat cereal (e.g., Wheatena): ½ cup 100% whole wheat noodles: 1 cup
Dairy	Milk (skim, 1%, 2%, or whole milk): 1 cup Cheese (any whole milk cheese, no additives): 1 ounce
Corn	Fresh or frozen corn kernels: ½ cup or 1 small cob
Pork	Cooked meat, not in a casserole: 3-6 ounces
Egg	Hard or soft boiled or poached: 2 eggs
Peanuts	Raw or dry roasted peanuts: ¼ cup nuts Peanut butter made of 100% peanuts only: 2 T peanut butter
Soy	Edamame: ½ cup Soy milk: 1 cup Tofu, tempeh: ½ cup
Shellfish	Challenge individual shellfish each time*: 3-6 ounces
Barley, rye	Cooked barley or rye cereal: ½ cup 100% rye crackers: 2-3 crackers

Tips for Selecting Challenge Foods

Reintroduce simple foods rather than complex foods with multiple ingredients.

When reintroducing coffee or caffeinated beverages, chocolate, food additives, or alcohol, make sure to eat just that food alone. This can be tricky, as they often are mixed with other foods you've been avoiding.

Examples:

- Chocolate candy also contains sugars, so beware of any reaction to a candy bar, as it will not be clear if there is a reaction to the chocolate or the sugar, or perhaps other additives.
- Do not challenge with a mocha drink that contains coffee AND chocolate, or a coffee drink that contains dairy (milk, or creamer). Other types of food used for challenging that may cause confusion include pizza or lasagna, which contain both dairy and wheat/gluten. It is also not unusual to react to wheat but not other gluten-containing grains (rye and barley).

Reactions to Challenge Foods

Stop eating any foods that produce a clear negative reaction. Track symptoms on the Food Reintroduction Symptoms Tracker. This chart and instructions for how to use it will be provided by your functional medicine practitioner.

The Reintroduction Process

Potential reactions include diarrhea or constipation, fatigue, depression, anxiety, gas, bloating, abdominal pain, headache, muscle or joint pain, skin irritations or break outs, insomnia, sinus congestion or runny nose, itching, or flushing.

When there are symptoms after challenging a food, stop eating that food immediately. Allow symptoms to completely clear before introducing the next challenge food. The food which initially caused symptoms can be tested again after the rest of the challenge foods have been tested.

Avoiding Foods Associated with Symptoms

Avoid foods that provoke symptoms for another three to six months. During this time, your healthcare practitioner may recommend medical foods or dietary supplements to help support healing.

After completing the initial testing of all the foods that were removed during the Elimination Diet, it may also be useful to test individual foods within a single food group to see if there is sensitivity to certain forms of the food.

For example, within the dairy group, test cheese made from cow's milk, sheep's milk, and goat's milk. Yogurt and butter may often be tolerated when milk is not. In the wheat group, test sprouted wheat products, spelt, emmer (farro), einkorn, and other ancient forms of wheat or sourdough.

Use the same process used in challenging foods during the initial reintroduction: introduce only one food at a time for one day, followed by a 24-hour observation period. If no reactions occur, proceed to the next food in that group. If symptoms occur, wait until all symptoms clear, then test the next food in that group.

Consult your functional medicine practitioner if there are questions when reintroducing foods.

Helpful Hints

Plan for success: Before starting the Elimination Diet, it is important to have everything required at home, as planning ahead will greatly improve your success. Shop ahead of time and make sure each food you buy is on the food list.

Read all food labels: Check the “Hidden Foods” list for various foods and ingredients to avoid. It is necessary to eat only the foods that are on the food list. If a food is not on the list, do not eat it. If you are uncertain, ask your functional medicine provider.

Don't go hungry: Add extra vegetables and fruits as needed. The menu is a basic one and needs a personal touch for your taste preferences. If you feel overwhelmed with food choices or meal planning, reach out to your practitioner.

Eat regularly: Eating consistently throughout the day will help keep blood sugar stable. Eat suggested snacks as needed for hunger or cravings. Keep snacks and salad dressings on hand for a quick snack or lunch salad. Eating out is generally not recommended, as it is impossible to know all the ingredients served within a meal. Traveling is also best avoided during this time, for the same reasons. It can be quite challenging to eat while on the road or in an airport. If you do travel or visit with friends or family, it is helpful to meal plan and bring food with you. Bring along nuts, fruits, and vegetables that will travel well.

Choose organic: Whenever possible, select fresh foods and organically-grown fruits and vegetables to reduce the intake of pesticides and chemical residues. Wash fruits and vegetables thoroughly.

Choose cold-pressed oils: Cold-pressed oils are not heated in processing and tend to be healthier than oils that have been heated. Organic oils are always preferred when possible.

Eliminate caffeine: Caffeine-containing beverages are not included on this diet. If you consume these drinks on a regular basis, reduce your caffeine intake slowly prior to beginning the Elimination Diet to prevent or reduce withdrawal symptoms. Try drinking half decaf/half regular coffee for a few days, and then slowly reduce intake of all caffeine. It is a good idea to first transition to decaffeinated coffee first before eliminating all coffee or tea.

Drink enough water: Remember to drink plenty of plain, filtered water each day. Add freshly squeezed lemon or lime juice for extra flavor.

Get rest: Your functional medicine practitioner may recommend limiting high-intensity exercise for part of this program or, in some cases, for the entire program, to allow the body to heal more effectively without the additional burden of exercise. Adequate rest and stress reduction is also important to the success of this program. A light, daily walk may be the perfect exercise during this time.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the difference between a food allergy, food intolerance, and a food sensitivity?

Food allergies cause severe symptoms immediately after a food is eaten. An allergic response will result in the immune system identifying the food as foreign and will cause allergic symptoms (swelling, itching, breathing difficulties, etc.). **Food sensitivities** are usually the result of an imbalance in the digestive system that affects the immune system. Often, food sensitivities cause delayed symptoms that are difficult to interpret. **Food intolerances** are reactions to certain food chemicals (e.g., lactose, MSG, histamines, etc.) when a person is lacking an enzyme or nutrient needed to break down that chemical. This results in the body being unable to properly process certain foods. Your functional medicine practitioner will help you determine whether a food allergy or food intolerance is present.

Are there any other foods I should avoid?

In addition to the major allergens contained in the foods omitted from the Elimination Diet, there are compounds in certain vegetables and fruits that may cause food intolerances in certain individuals. These compounds include histamines, oxalates, salicylates, nickel, and nightshades. Your functional medicine practitioner may choose to have you avoid foods that contain these compounds if there is reason to think that these foods are causing symptoms. IFM has detailed handouts with food lists if your practitioner recommends eliminating these foods.

Can I take a blood test rather than following the Elimination Diet?

Blood tests to identify food reactions have not been shown to be dependable and accurate in identifying food sensitivities and intolerances. The desire to see “proof” of a food sensitivity is understandable, however the results of blood tests are not as reliable as eliminating and challenging foods. Moreover, food intolerances may not show up on blood tests as there may be no immune response involved in your body’s reaction.

What if the Elimination Diet doesn’t resolve my symptoms?

When the Elimination Diet does not improve symptoms, it may be necessary to investigate further with your functional medicine practitioner. It is essential to assess whether the Elimination Diet was consistently followed and whether the food challenges were carried out correctly, as it can be easy to make mistakes while following this plan. To achieve good results, it is necessary to follow the diet 100% of the time. If the diet was followed properly, your functional medicine practitioner may recommend another approach.

What do I eat in place of bread?

Rice cakes and tortillas made from rice or hemp can be an acceptable substitute for a sandwich. It might also be a good idea to eat less grain carbohydrates during this three-week period. Use a large lettuce leaf as a substitute “wrap” for vegetables or meats.

Frequently Asked Questions

What additional spices or flavorings can be used?

All spices and herbs are encouraged as they not only enhance the natural flavors of food but contain powerful phytonutrients for health. Experiment with herbs and spices—try new ones. Fresh herbs should be added near the end of cooking, while dried herbs should be added near the start of cooking.

Which condiments should be used?

All types of vinegar are allowed (balsamic, ume plum, unflavored rice, apple cider, herb-infused) and help enhance the flavor of vegetables. The following condiments should be avoided: chocolate, ketchup, relish, chutney, soy sauce, tamari, barbecue sauce, teriyaki, and sweet and sour pickles.

What if legumes usually cause gas and bloating?

Legumes are high in protein, fiber, vitamins, and minerals. Try to increase intake slowly over the course of one to three weeks. Soaking beans for 30 minutes up to 6 hours (or overnight) before cooking and discarding the water may also decrease gas that many people experience. Draining and rinsing canned legumes is also helpful. Lentils and green peas are easier for some people to tolerate. If there is difficulty in digesting these foods, your functional medicine practitioner can help you determine whether a food sensitivity is present.

Can canned vegetables be used instead of fresh vegetables with this diet?

Fresh and frozen vegetables are preferable because they retain more of their vitamins and generally have less added salt. Canned legumes (chick peas, black beans, kidney beans, etc.) and tomatoes are generally acceptable, but rinse the legumes well before using. Draining and rinsing canned beans will help ease digestion. Be sure to buy only BPA-free vegetables and canned beans.

What do I do if I am unsure whether a food reaction has occurred?

If you are unsure as to whether a food reaction happened, it is best to challenge that food again. Be sure that there are no unusual circumstances on a challenge day (such as a very stressful day or a day of travel). If you are having any symptoms, such as a headache, it is best to delay the reintroduction of the food. Be sure that enough of the food is eaten to create a good challenge. If no reaction happens the second time, then that food is more than likely not a trigger food.

If all trigger foods are avoided for 3 months, how do I know when it is fine to eat them again?

After three months, try to challenge the foods again. If there is a reaction, try again after another three to six months. Other reactions may never be “fixed”—no matter how long you avoid that food, the reactions will still occur.



Frequently Asked Questions

If a food is re-challenged and found to be acceptable, how often may I eat it?

The answer is different for everyone. Even if you have no reaction on re-challenging, it may be worthwhile to wait at least four days before trying it again. It is probably best to eat the food only a couple of times a week. If a minor reaction is experienced, wait a week between each time you eat it. Each person responds differently, so cultivating body awareness is important.

There are many different types of elimination diets. How is this one from IFM different?

There are many types of elimination diets, ranging from very restrictive (eating only one food a day or just a few foods each day), to less restrictive (eliminating only one food or food group for a period of time). This Elimination Diet was developed by IFM as a way to begin to identify problem foods, particularly when there is no suggestion of which foods may be connected to chronic complaints. This dietary approach includes elimination of gluten and dairy foods, along with pork, beef, corn, eggs, soy, peanuts, shellfish, caffeine, alcohol, and refined sugars.

Resources and Tools for Success

Even though this is a short-term process, completing an elimination diet can be a complex and sometimes confusing process. Included in this food plan suite are recipes, snack suggestions, a shopping list, and other information to make this plan much easier to follow. Look over this information carefully. If there are any questions or concerns about this food plan, please contact your functional medicine provider for guidance.

The following handouts are available from a functional medicine practitioner to assist with using the IFM Elimination Diet:

- [Elimination Diet – Bibliography](#)
- [Elimination Diet – Food List](#)
- [Elimination Diet – Weekly Planner and Recipes](#)
- [Food Reintroduction Symptoms Tracker](#)
- [Hidden Foods](#)



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