

COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE

Elimination Diet

A short-term plan to calm the gut & identify food triggers



Functional & Integrative Medicine · Justen Watkins, DO



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Why the Elimination Diet?

Health concerns that haven't responded to other treatments may improve after completing an Elimination Diet. Specific foods can be related to a long list of conditions—digestive problems, headaches, chronic sinus drainage, low energy, depression, mood swings, eczema, skin irritations, joint aches, asthma, weight gain, and more.

Many people suffer these symptoms for years without realizing the connection to food. The Elimination Diet first removes common food triggers, then helps you identify specific problem foods through a personalized reintroduction.

After a three-week elimination period, you add foods back **one at a time** to observe whether each causes symptoms. Foods that continue to provoke symptoms are avoided for another three to six months, then retried. Once the gut has healed, some foods that initially caused symptoms may be tolerated again.

This is a **short-term** food plan—healing the gut and eventually eating a wide variety of whole foods are the ultimate goals. Your practitioner will advise on duration (typically three weeks). Initially, symptoms may briefly worsen (rarely more than a few days) due to withdrawal—transient reactions can include changes in sleep, fatigue, lightheadedness, headaches, joint stiffness, and digestive changes.

Features of the Elimination Diet

Identifies food triggers

Food reactions are frequently overlooked contributors to chronic issues. Allergies cause severe symptoms immediately; sensitivities are delayed by hours or days (usually from a digestive imbalance affecting the immune system); intolerances result from reactions to food chemicals (MSG, nickel, histamine) or a missing enzyme like lactase. This diet helps identify triggers whether allergy, intolerance, or sensitivity.

Reduces inflammation

Any food reaction can trigger low-grade gut inflammation, breaking down the intestinal wall and exposing undigested particles to the blood (“leaky gut”). This further stimulates the immune system. The intestinal lining replaces itself every two to four days, so removing trigger foods while supplying anti-inflammatory foods makes newly formed gut tissue stronger and healthier.

Supports a healthy microbiome

As much as 70% of the immune system is clustered around the digestive tract, and gut flora help regulate the immune response. When the gut is inflamed, the balance of healthy versus unhealthy bacteria can shift. A healthy microbiome can be rebuilt with whole foods high in protein, phytonutrients, probiotics, and prebiotics—the basis of this diet.

Features (continued)

Dairy-free, gluten-free

Gluten and dairy are omitted because they are frequently associated with reactions. Lactose can cause gas, bloating, and digestive upset; fermented dairy is lower in lactose but contains casein, which can also cause reactions. Gluten proteins (gliadins) can break down nutrient-absorbing cells in the small intestine, contributing to leaky gut and sensitivities.

Dairy to avoid: butter, all cheese, heavy cream, half and half, ice cream, kefir, milk, sour cream, yogurt. **Gluten grains to avoid:** barley, bulgur, oats*, rye, seitan, triticale, wheat (farro, kamut, spelt, all varieties).

***Oats, even gluten-free labeled, are often cross-contaminated; follow your practitioner's advice when reintroducing them.**

Phytonutrients to heal the gut & reduce toxic burden

The diet includes a wide variety of colorful vegetables and fruits whose phytonutrients promote healing, protect against cell damage, and reduce inflammation. It encourages organic, grass-fed, pasture-raised, and free-range foods to lower toxic burden and reduce exposure to additives, pesticides, and other chemicals.

No calorie restriction & body awareness

Weight loss is not a goal; calorie counting isn't required, though you must eat only foods on the list. During reintroduction, many people develop heightened awareness of how specific foods make them feel.

Touring Through the Food Plan

To succeed, it's essential to know which foods to avoid and which are okay to eat.

Foods to Avoid

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, and sugar (white, high-fructose corn syrup, brown sugar, sucrose).

Foods to Eat

Dairy alternatives, fish, fruits (only those listed), game meats, gluten-free whole grains (amaranth, buckwheat, millet, quinoa, rice, teff), healthy oils, legumes (except soy and peanuts), nuts (except peanuts), poultry, seeds, and vegetables.

Protein

Protein helps balance blood sugar, and amino acids bind to toxins in the liver to help remove them—include some in every meal or snack. Choose lean, pasture-raised, grass-fed, organic, non-GMO sources: low-mercury fish (halibut, herring, mackerel, salmon, sardines), wild game (buffalo, elk, lamb, venison), and poultry. Vegetarian options include spirulina, legumes, lentils, peas, and hemp/pea/rice protein powders.

Legumes

A perfect source of quality protein and complex carbohydrates for fullness and stable blood sugar—at least one serving daily as soup, cooked beans, dips, or hummus.

Touring (continued)

Dairy Alternatives

Dairy is excluded. Alternatives are mostly nut milks; read labels, as coconut (boxed), almond, flaxseed, or hazelnut milks often contain added sweeteners or gums. Unsweetened coconut kefir is included for its prebiotic and probiotic potential.

Nuts & Seeds

A variety are included; regular nut consumption improves heart disease risk factors. Aim for 1–2 servings of raw, unsalted nuts daily. Ground flax and hemp can go into smoothies or salads; nut butters and tahini work as condiments. (Your practitioner may modify the plan if nut allergies are suspected.)

Fats & Oils

Choose minimally refined, cold-pressed, organic oils—extra-virgin olive oil supports heart and liver health, and whole olives are included. Canned coconut milk is here (a fat); look for BPA-free or use boxed. Avocado oil is nutrient-dense; ghee is included (milk proteins removed). Sesame oil is included for liver and anti-inflammatory benefits, along with almond, flaxseed, hempseed, and walnut oils. Store in tinted glass; discard if rancid.

Vegetables & Fruits

Aim for at least nine servings of colorful, phytonutrient-rich plant foods daily, mostly vegetables. Cruciferous vegetables (broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage, kale, bok choy, arugula) support detoxification. Eat a “rainbow of colors.” Phytonutrient-rich fruits reduce inflammation—eat with a little protein to offset blood sugar spikes; fresh or frozen, no added sugars.

The Reintroduction Process

Tips for selecting challenge foods

Reintroduce simple foods rather than complex ones with multiple ingredients. When testing coffee, chocolate, additives, or alcohol, eat that food alone.

- Chocolate candy also contains sugar—a reaction wouldn't clearly point to the chocolate.
- Don't challenge with a mocha (coffee AND chocolate) or coffee with dairy.
- Pizza or lasagna contain both dairy and wheat/gluten—avoid as challenge foods.
- You may react to wheat but not other gluten grains (rye, barley).

Reactions to challenge foods

Stop eating any food that produces a clear negative reaction, and track symptoms on the Food Reintroduction Symptoms Tracker. Potential reactions include diarrhea or constipation, fatigue, depression, anxiety, gas, bloating, abdominal pain, headache, muscle or joint pain, skin irritations, insomnia, congestion, itching, or flushing. Allow symptoms to fully clear before introducing the next challenge food.

Avoiding foods associated with symptoms

Avoid trigger foods for another three to six months; your practitioner may recommend medical foods or supplements to support healing. You can later test individual foods within a group (e.g., cow vs. sheep vs. goat dairy; ancient wheat varieties) using the same one-food-at-a-time process with a 24-hour observation period.

Helpful Hints

- **Plan for success:** have everything you need at home; shop ahead and confirm each food is on the list.
- **Read all food labels** and check the “Hidden Foods” list. If a food isn’t on the list, don’t eat it.
- **Don’t go hungry:** add extra vegetables and fruits; personalize the menu to your taste.
- **Eat regularly** to keep blood sugar stable; keep snacks and dressings on hand. Eating out and traveling are best avoided—bring your own food if needed.
- **Choose organic** fresh foods when possible and wash produce thoroughly.
- **Choose cold-pressed oils**, which are healthier than heated oils.
- **Eliminate caffeine** gradually beforehand to reduce withdrawal; transition to decaf first.
- **Drink enough water;** add lemon or lime for flavor.
- **Get rest:** your practitioner may limit high-intensity exercise so the body can heal—a light daily walk may be ideal.

Frequently Asked Questions

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

Allergies cause severe symptoms immediately (the immune system identifies the food as foreign). Sensitivities usually stem from a digestive imbalance affecting the immune system and cause delayed, hard-to-interpret symptoms. Intolerances are reactions to food chemicals (lactose, MSG, histamines) when an enzyme or nutrient is lacking.

Are there other foods I should avoid?

Beyond the major allergens, compounds in certain vegetables and fruits—histamines, oxalates, salicylates, nickel, and nightshades—may cause intolerances in some people. Your practitioner may have you avoid these if there's reason to suspect them.

Can I take a blood test instead?

Blood tests for food reactions are not reliable for identifying sensitivities and intolerances—eliminating and challenging foods is more dependable. Intolerances may not show up on blood tests, as there may be no immune response involved.

What if it doesn't resolve my symptoms?

First assess whether the diet was followed 100% and challenges done correctly—it's easy to make mistakes. If followed properly, your practitioner may recommend another approach.

What do I eat in place of bread?

Rice cakes and rice or hemp tortillas can substitute; a large lettuce leaf works as a wrap. Eating fewer grain carbohydrates during the three weeks is also fine.

FAQs (continued)

What spices and condiments can I use?

All spices and herbs are encouraged (add fresh herbs near the end of cooking, dried herbs near the start). All vinegars are allowed. Avoid chocolate, ketchup, relish, chutney, soy sauce, tamari, barbecue sauce, teriyaki, and sweet-and-sour pickles.

What if legumes cause gas and bloating?

Increase intake slowly over one to three weeks. Soak beans (30 minutes to overnight) and discard the water; drain and rinse canned legumes. Lentils and green peas are easier for some to tolerate.

Can I use canned vegetables?

Fresh and frozen are preferable (more vitamins, less salt). Canned legumes and tomatoes are generally acceptable—rinse legumes well and buy BPA-free.

What if I'm unsure whether a reaction occurred?

Challenge that food again, avoiding unusual circumstances (stress, travel). Eat enough to create a real challenge. If no reaction the second time, it's likely not a trigger.

After avoiding trigger foods for 3 months, when can I eat them again?

Try challenging them again after three months; if you react, wait another three to six months. Some reactions may never resolve no matter how long you avoid the food.

If a re-challenged food is acceptable, how often can I eat it?

It varies. Even with no reaction, wait at least four days before trying it again, and eat it only a couple of times per week. Cultivating body awareness is key.

QUICK TIP

This guide is for general education and does not replace individualized medical advice. The Elimination Diet works best under the guidance of your functional medicine provider.