**Your 5-Step Nutritional Action Plan**

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Most think that one day, perhaps when we least expect it, fate comes knocking on our door and there it is: cancer, or heart disease, or dementia, or whatever else we fear most. Although such a scenario can be terrifying, in some ways, it’s comforting. Why? Because if that is indeed how we get sick, then there’s not much we can do about it. We’re going to get it or we’re not. Right? *Wrong!* Did you know that 50- to 75 percent of US cancer deaths are caused by three harmful behaviors: tobacco use, lack of exercise, and poor diet? And, even higher percentages of heart disease and stroke are believed to be preventable based on lifestyle choices. So, how does diet, in particular, effect how we age?

For decades now, in the United States, the discourse regarding eating has been dominated by a fixation on weight. The word “diet” originally derived from a Greek word meaning “manner of living.” Today, however, it seems to be synonymous with “weight-loss program.” What that means is that – as a culture – we tend to focus on manipulating what we eat in order to lose weight rather than focusing on the nutrients we need to perform at our best, be resilient, and ward off threats to our health. To live an authentically healthy life, we need to change the focus from deprivation to providing our bodies with core nutritional needs. To do that, we have to have a plan. Below is a 5-step guide for determining your nutritional goals and working to achieve them.

**Your 5-Step Nutritional Action Plan**

1. **Determine Your Nutritional Goal(s).** Beyond the simple fact that you have to eat if you want to survive, do you have any other nutritional goals? Perhaps your doctor has told you that, for your health, you need to be thinner. Maybe you want more energy. Or, it may be that you are concerned about lowering your risk for cancer or heart attack. Whatever it is, have a clear understanding of what other goals you might have for eating, and for the food choices you make. Start by writing that goal or goals down in a notebook.
2. **For Three Days, Track What You Eat.** Schedule three days to pay careful attention to what you eat, when you eat, and how much you eat. Write it down or record it via an app like Fitbit or an online tool such as [ChooseMyPlate.gov](http://www.choosemyplate.gov/tools-supertracker). Set aside an hour to review your findings. Do you notice that you are a late-night snacker? That you eat a lot of sugary desserts or that you hardly ever get 4-5 servings of vegetables per day?
3. **Develop a Plan … a Very Small One.** Once you’ve taken stock of your eating habits, develop a plan that will enable you to meet your nutritional goal(s). Don’t get too ambitious! Take baby steps. Ask yourself, “What’s the smallest change to my diet that I can make right now?” And, do that. For example, you may opt to eliminate one dessert per week or replace one serving of bread with an extra helping of vegetables. Or, you may simply endeavor to cut out a small percentage of your daily caloric intake. Whatever it is, take baby steps, and build on it little by little.
4. **Strive to Eat Like Great-Grandma**. For most of the time that humans have been on earth, we’ve eaten foods that had less available energy (calories) per gram and more vitamins, minerals, amino acids, and fiber than the foods we eat today. These foods consisted mostly of fruits, wild vegetables, nuts, beans, fish and small amounts of lean meats. The recent resurgence of interest in the Paleo diet is based on the belief that we do indeed require foods eaten by our ancestors to be healthy. I always tell people, “If your great-grandmother didn’t eat it, you probably shouldn’t either.” Seek to incorporate more of these foods into your diet.
5. **Seek Out Friends Who Live Healthy Lifestyles.** Motivational speaker Jim Rohn used to say, “You are the average of the five people you spend the most time with.” We tend to adopt the lifestyle habits of those we hang around most – choose wisely.

Remember, nutrition is a key determinate for how we age, how resilient we are, and our overall health and wellbeing. *Live long! Live well!*