Steering yourself away from junk food

Drive-thrus, vending machines, "instant" pre-packaged meals: it's no coincidence that as the demand for food convenience expands, so too do waistlines. In fact, as of 2004 almost 60 per cent of Canadians were either overweight or obese according to Statistics Canada. And while inactivity plays a big role, the increasing appetite for junk food—or food typically high in calories and/or fat and low in nutritional value—is also a culprit.

Ditch a junk food habit and put yourself on a path to better health by:

Clearing out those cupboards. Why test your willpower by keeping treats around? Shed temptation and any extra pounds by getting rid of junk food heavyweights like chips, pop, candy and any other nutritionally "empty" snack foods you have a love/hate relationship with. Then restock your fridge and cupboards at home or at work with healthier options such as fruit, veggies, whole grain crackers, low fat yogurt and unsalted almonds or walnuts (though eat in moderation as they're high in fat and calories but nutritionally rich).

Listening to your body and mind. If you cheer yourself up with a bag of potato chips or find solace in a sundae, you're probably an emotional eater. Instead of acting on emotional responses with food, stop, take the time to assess what's really going on and find healthier ways to cope. If stress sends you snacking for instance, why not take a brisk walk or hit the gym? You'll burn off both emotional and physical stress and avoid that "I shouldn't have eaten that" over-indulgence guilt.

Practicing the 80-20 rule. Ever notice by declaring you're on a diet, that so-called forbidden food suddenly becomes much more desirable? Avoid the feelings of deprivation diets create by focusing on eating healthy at least 80 per cent of the time and allowing yourself a few indulgences throughout the week.

Doing it yourself. Get reacquainted with healthy food and your kitchen by cooking up your own wholesome versions of "junk food." Find healthy recipes online, invest in a heart smart cookbook, or take some out from the library and start cooking! French fry enthusiasts, for example, might "indulge" in oven-baked sweet potato wedges, while apple pie addicts can still get a taste of the sweet life through stuffed baked apples. DIY cooking not only allows you to know exactly what's in what you eat, but also helps you better control portion size—another huge problem in today's fast food world.

Planning ahead. Take a few hours on your day off to plan, shop and prepare a few simple, healthy make-ahead meals for the week to come. Knowing that a nourishing meal is waiting at home will make it easier to drive past the drive-thru at the end of the day.

Snacking well and often. Snacking on high-sugar, high carbohydrate, low fibre, low nutrient food puts you on the fast-track to an energy crash. Instead, try eating smaller meals and snacking on nutrient-rich food—such as beans (try a bean dip and veggies), lean meat, fruits and veggies and whole grains—more frequently throughout the day. Experts suggest that frequent, wholesome snacking is a great way to avoid overeating and keep blood sugar and energy levels from spiking and dipping.

Get support. Whether you're unsure about what a balanced diet looks like, or are concerned your eating habits are spiralling out of control, professional support, be it from a physician, or another health professional, can help you better understand your behaviour and provide you with the insights and information you need to stay on the right nutritional track.

Like any engine, your body runs better when it consumes the high-grade fuel. Rather than unconsciously feeding it the low-grade empty calories of junk food, take the time and energy to make conscious food choices that nourish your body too. Reducing or even eliminating the junk food in your diet will not only help you look and feel better, but can—over a lifetime—also increase your body's mileage.