

ABCs of food journaling

by J. Melody Murdock

ready for a reality check?

Ahh, my Lucky jeans. I've tried them on dozens of times over the last few months. Each time, thinking "by now, they'll surely fit." Each time, the end result looking something like the time I tried to fit my sleeping bag into the stuff sack meant for my toddler's bag — let's just say there were some stretched seams.

Eight months since the birth of my son, and I was still 12 pounds from my pre-pregnancy weight. I worked out, ate well, felt good emotionally and yet the pounds stuck — month after month. I'd hit a seemingly endless weight-loss plateau.

At the height of my frustration, I had a conversation with our very own editor, Pam. She threw out a challenge. "You're a writer," she said. "So write — write down what you eat." I was convinced my eating habits weren't my problem, but I was desperate. So I took Pam's challenge and began keeping a food journal. I have two words for my experience... "reality check."

It was like I'd been charging to a credit card with no regular statements reminding me of my purchases and credit limit. I'd never before assigned a numeric value to food. I had no idea how quickly the nibbles and bites add up.

The simple act of recording and tracking my daily caloric intake and physical activity launched me down a new path — nudging me off my weight-loss plateau. After just two weeks of food journaling, I lost five pounds.

After speaking with health, fitness and nutrition experts I learned the benefits of food journaling go beyond weight loss and can help anyone wanting to improve overall health. Food loggers and experts agree that a food journal doesn't have to be complicated or time consuming. In fact, we've pared it down to the ABCs...



Awareness is the first step to a healthy change, which we all deserve.

A Admit it.

The diet blinders must come off, but it's not always easy. Just ask Kim Hatch, who recently started food journaling. "The hardest part isn't the tracking or the time," she says. "It's admitting to myself what I eat."

"I had no idea how much sugar I was eating," she says. Like most offices, hers stocks an array of snacks. "I was always refilling my mug with candy. I dipped into it throughout the day without even noticing." Once Kim realized candy was the cause of her energy highs and lows, she began filling her mug with almonds (which were in the snack room all along) and felt a noticeable difference.

Amy Webb, who's kept a food journal on and off for years, says it's eye opening. "It helps me see what I'm eating and why." Amy discovered she's a stress eater. "If work was stressful, I ate more candy," she says. She also learned that even though she was generally eating healthy foods, her portion sizes were "out of control."

Amy's right that it's eye opening, but not always easy to swallow. Most of us are living in diet denial. "There is

an inner resistance to recording and admitting what we eat and drink," explains Kendra Shaila Fried, founder of Wasatch Integrative Health. She says, "If we see it, we might have to change it. And maybe part of us isn't quite ready to give up the cookies or fries."

Awareness is the first step to a healthy change, which we all deserve. So, open your eyes, quit denying and admit what's going down the hatch.

B Be specific.

A food journal can be more than just a record of what we eat and drink. It's often helpful to record details such as the time, calorie count, hunger level, mood, energy levels, trigger for eating, food group, etc. Tailor your journal to fit your needs.

For example, maybe you're having digestive problems. A food journal may help you notice certain food combinations disturbing your system. Kendra advises, "Be specific and detailed. Don't leave anything out, all liquids, foods, even supplements."

who can benefit from a food journal?

People with chronic symptoms

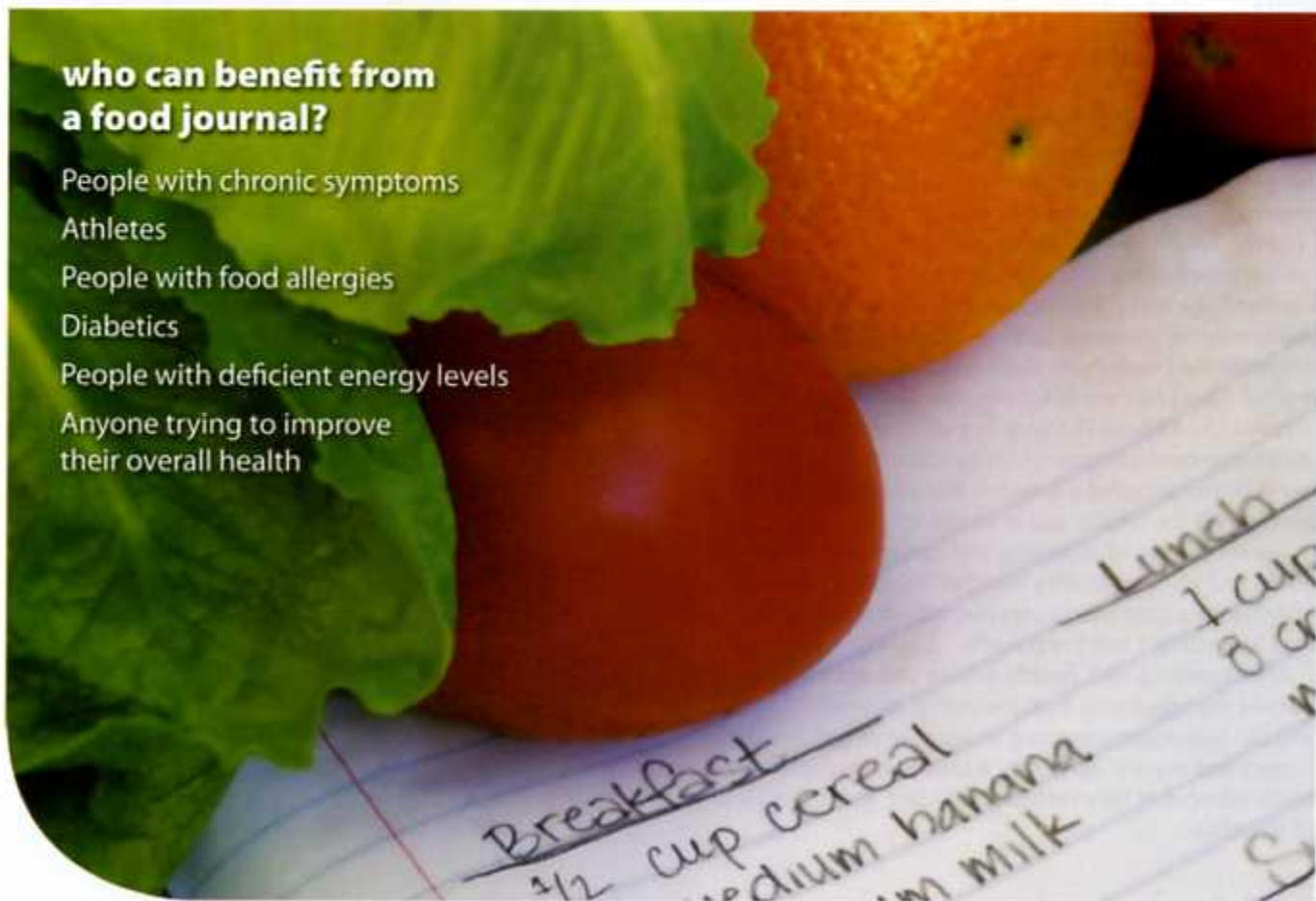
Athletes

People with food allergies

Diabetics

People with deficient energy levels

Anyone trying to improve their overall health



Part of being specific is being honest. You are your only audience and you only cheat yourself if you don't record those two Oreos you ate on your way out the door. If it's going down your throat, it's going in your journal.

C Create a dialogue.

A food journal is the perfect way to begin a healthy and intuitive dialogue with your body. As Kendra points out, we are constantly bombarded by conflicting information from alternative health professionals, dieticians, doctors and gurus. As a result, we often feel overwhelmed and lose touch with our body.

"Your body is always talking to you," Kendra points out. "If you start listening, you will know exactly what it needs to come back to balance, health and your ideal weight."

Katherine Beals, director of the Nutrition Clinic at the University of Utah, agrees. She says people have lost touch with basic body urges such as hunger and satiety. "People eat when they aren't hungry," she says. Her advice is to ask yourself questions such as, "Am I hungry?" or "What's causing me to eat this?"

Some people call this mindful eating, which means you pay attention to your body's subtle and natural cues. If you listen, your body will tell you when it wants to be fed and when it's had enough. So, listen up. Your body has a right to be heard.

D Do it your way.

Decide what you want out of your food journal then determine your food logging system. For me, my goal was weight loss. I'm at my computer a lot, so I found a free online tracking system.

The program helps me formulate my weight goals and track my progress. This setup works for my needs, but may not suite everyone. You may prefer a notebook, printed form or your Blackberry.

If you're wondering about sustainability, a food journal doesn't have to be a lifelong commitment. In fact, if you're doing it right, you'll only need to do it long enough to form new and better eating habits. It's a tool you can use again and again to improve your health.

Remember, you know your schedule, commitment and needs better than anyone, so do what works for you.

E Enjoy the results.

If weight loss is your goal, start saving for smaller clothes. Amy lost 30 pounds while food journaling and has kept it off through two pregnancies. "It really taught me a better way to eat and that each bite counts," she says.

No matter your purpose for food journaling, each bite really does count toward a healthier you. I like the way Kendra puts it: "Your relationship with food is one of the most intimate you will ever have. What you eat literally becomes the cells in your body and provides the fuel for all those other important areas of your life that need your time and attention."

As for me, soon enough you'll see me enjoying the results as I stroll around town in my favorite Lucky jeans. 🍷



ONLINE FOOD LOGGING SITES

www.thedailyplate.com

www.mypyramid.gov

www.myfooddiary.com

www.fitday.com

www.calorieking.com

www.dietagenda.com