

Eating for Peak Performance

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If you know you're not quite firing on all cylinders, get back in the game with these health & nutrition hacks.

You're a busy executive and with that comes long hours, stress, pressure, expectation and possibly frequent entertaining. You feel you're doing okay. Maybe you've not even had to go to the doctor recently and, on paper at least, your health looks fine. But you've started to experience the kind of health niggles that come from life catching up with you: fatigue, headaches, weight gain, digestive problems, stress or anxiety, and lack of mental clarity.

It's the perfect storm where lack of time meets poor food choices and collides with a shortage of sleep and too much stress. That is burnout, and you don't want to go there.

Food and lifestyle changes are the game-changer you need to re-discover your power. Let me show you how to regain that edge you thought you'd lost.

It's easy to think 'there's nothing really wrong' and to plod on regardless, managing any annoying health symptoms that come along. In truth, things could be so much better. The first step is to really recognise and acknowledge how many symptoms you are experiencing on a regular basis, to understand the degree to which your health is under pressure. A good start is to jot down daily any symptoms you experience over the next week – whether that's energy slumps over the day or some of the 'bigger' symptoms mentioned above.

How you approach change is up to you: you could choose to work on improving the way you eat (which is a lot easier with support of a coach), or you might decide to work on a specific area like meal planning, sleep or stress reduction in the knowledge that, if you could just fix that one thing, everything else would fall into line. Even taking action in one of these areas may be enough to get you off that hamster wheel and make a real difference to your energy levels.

Here are my top tips to improve your health and performance:

1. Eat to balance your energy levels

A diet that balances your blood sugar is the best way of helping you to get back in the game. The same old sandwich at your desk doesn't work. By getting the wrong lunch, you starve your brain of the key nutrients needed to function at peak level.

There are 3 simple rules:

1. Eat regularly
2. ALWAYS eat protein at every meal/snack
3. Be selective about the amount and type of starchy carbohydrates

Quick win:

Swap your usual tuna mayo sandwich and crisps for a soup and a protein-based salad, or at least a wrap or open sandwich (both of which are less bready). All high street eateries will have plenty of options. Aim to find three to four different things you enjoy.

2. Reduce caffeine

There's nothing inherently wrong with caffeine. However, caffeine is a stimulant, and it's addictive! It's found in coffee, tea, cola, chocolate and energy drinks. Although it may promise instant energy, it just makes the energy problem worse. The more caffeine you consume, the more your body and brain become insensitive to their own natural stimulants, dopamine and adrenalin. You then need more stimulants just to feel normal, pushing your body to produce more dopamine and adrenalin. Initially, this may make you feel more stressed, but the ultimate result can be adrenal exhaustion, leading to apathy, lethargy and an inability to cope.

Caffeine also has a big impact on the quality of your sleep. The average half-life of caffeine (the time taken for the body to eliminate one half of the caffeine in your system) is approximately six hours. The remaining caffeine can stay in your system a lot longer. Drinking a late afternoon cup of coffee or tea will still be having an impact many hours later!

Quick win:

Limit yourself to two cups a day and enjoy these before lunch, giving your body time to get rid of the caffeine in your system before you wind down in the evening. Instead, opt for decaf versions or consider herbal tea or water. You'll be surprised how much better you will feel simply by cutting back.

3. Drink more water

Water makes up about 60 per cent of your body, and every single cell needs water to function properly. Every day the body needs to replace about 2.4 litres of water, and if there's one thing I see regularly with clients, it's forgetting to drink enough. Drinking water also keeps you energised and focussed. Not staying hydrated leads to irritability, poor concentration and ultimately poor performance.

A good clue as to whether you are drinking enough is the colour of your urine. The ideal situation is that you have clear to very pale yellow urine. Light yellow is also okay. Pale honey is borderline, but get drinking soon. A yellow, more cloudy colour means: drink now! A darker yellow is not healthy and indicates dehydration.

Quick win:

There are various apps for smartphones to encourage you to drink more and record what you drink. You can also buy special water bottles with alarms to remind you, or systems to track how much you've drunk – such as this Joseph Joseph one <https://bit.ly/42ds8Tj>.

At a minimum, just get yourself a 1.5l bottle of water from the shops (refill at home on subsequent days) and ensure you finish this by the end of the day – on top of any other drinks you're having. The bottle is a visual reminder of how well you are doing. Ideally, you want to work up to having 2 litres a day.

4. Get out of the office

One of the most important things you can do for productivity and energy levels is to take your full lunch break. Studies show that taking a lunch break allows your mind to rest, recharge and refocus. This is proven to boost your concentration and productivity for the rest of the day and help keep energy levels up. The flip side is that not taking a lunch break can leave you feeling more tired and stressed, less focused and in a worse mood by the time the day ends.

Eating while you continue to check emails can lead to 'mindless eating'. Getting away from your desk makes you more conscious of what and how much you're eating, and you're likely to chew your food more thoroughly, too, which helps with digestion. Another side effect of distracted eating can be snacking later in the day – particularly on sugary snacks. In short, eating at the desk goes directly against the science of peak performance. If you take your lunch break outdoors, the benefits are even greater. The sun's rays stimulate the body to produce Vitamin D and encourage the production of the 'happy hormone' serotonin.

Quick win:

Make a point of taking a lunch break even if it's only half an hour. If someone else controls your diary, ask them not to schedule meetings during your lunch break. Instead, especially when the weather is reasonable, take a gentle walk outside for no purpose. Not to go anywhere; just to be.

5. Plan ahead

Eating food you have cooked or prepared at home is healthier for you. It is also considerably cheaper. If you grab a coffee and a croissant first thing, then head for a second coffee and a snack, grab lunch out and a ready meal on the way home, it's easy to burn through £35 in a single day.

The key to fixing this (and saving a lot of cash) is planning. Without a weekly food plan, it will be pure luck if you end up with the right foods in the fridge or cupboard. And, without planning your time, you won't always make the time to enjoy breakfast or make that lunch. Here's the thing about planning: you need to actually plan to plan. You need to put time in the diary to think about what you are going to eat and then shop for it (or book your online shop). Ideally, it would be at a similar time each week, so it becomes a habit. It's easy to get derailed by events, situations, relationships and tasks that insert themselves into your already-busy life.

Quick win:

Your challenge is to plan what you will eat for the week. When will you do that? When will you do the internet shop? If you make breakfast to take to work, what can you put in place so that it actually happens?

6. Focus on getting a good night's sleep

Sleep matters big time. Not getting enough is sabotaging your health and killing your productivity at work. Lack of sleep also messes with stress hormones, and stress messes with your sleep. It's a vicious circle and one particularly good reason why it is so important to take the time to unwind before going to bed. Researchers reckon most people need about seven hours of sleep on a regular basis. Just knowing the information is not going to give you the restful night's sleep you are looking for. The only thing that counts is action. If you know beyond a shadow of a doubt that lack of sleep is at the root of much of what isn't working for you right now, I invite you to put getting more and/or better sleep at the top of your to-do list this week to see what a difference it can make.

Quick win:

Figure out how much sleep you actually get on a daily basis. For one week, do whatever it takes to ensure that, on more nights than not, you get seven hours. Adjust your bedtime accordingly and do all those things you know to do to wind down before turning in – no screen time for an hour before bed, dark room, even a 10-minute guided meditation app to wind down.

I help many women get back on track and optimise their health, energy and productivity through diet and lifestyle changes. The accountability of working with someone else on this can make all the difference. If you would like to have a complementary explorator chat to see how I could help you, please book yourself in using this link <https://bit.ly/3N8RQE8>.