

In the Nutrition Lane

Jeannie Sykes, PhD, RD



Setting Nutrition Goals for the New Year

The beginning of a new year is the traditional time for setting goals, despite all the jokes about their likely outcome. With the holiday season (and foods) just behind us, it's a good time to consider ways in which you can make some positive changes in food choices.

The most important part of making a change, whether involving diet or any other aspect of your life, is to set a sound goal. A well stated goal guides you toward it. For example, "I'm going to eat less junk food" may sound like a reasonable goal, but it provides no clues as to how you'll accomplish it, nor any way to measure your progress. "I am going to replace my usual French fries with fruit at least 5 times a week" tells *specifically* what you plan to do, and is also *measurable*. In fact, a *SMART* goal includes the following characteristics:

- **Specific and simple** – explicitly states which behavior you are targeting
- **Measurable** – provides a way to evaluate progress
- **Active** – stated in behavioral terms; what you are going to *do*
- **Realistic** – challenging, but not out of reach (one of the hardest aspects of goal setting)
- **Time-frame-oriented** – includes times in which it is to be done, such as per day, week, or month

Determining a reasonable food goal and then devising a plan to accomplish it are the first steps in making constructive changes. Coming up with a plan usually requires giving some thought to the likely obstacles to reaching your goal. For example, an obstacle to replacing French fries with fruit might be eating with others who eat French fries, not having ready access to fresh fruit, or feeling afraid that peers might tease you for daring to be different. Until we think about what the barriers are likely to be, we can't begin to develop the strategies necessary to overcoming them.

Another crucial element of reaching our goals is accountability. A good idea for some nutrition goals is to keep a record of everything you eat and drink. This helps reveal how well you are meeting your stated goal, and also creates awareness of how you're actually eating throughout the day. Sometimes you can pick up on trends ("I noticed that I tend to pay less attention to how well I eat when I'm hanging out with my friends"), or get clues as to what motivated a food choice ("I ate my French fries and Joey's too because I'd skipped lunch and was *so hungry!*").

Eventually you'll need to re-evaluate your goal. You may want to set some higher standards for yourself, or you may decide you need to make a slightly easier goal to work toward. Whatever your progress, you'll be ahead of where you started; with each new goal you have the opportunity to learn insights useful for the next goal. And by the way, always remember the adage, "*progress, not perfection.*"