While many dietary camps try to convince people that their way of eating is the best, there is not one approach that is right for everyone. Instead of providing “rules” or “diet philosophy,” this article provides three main strategies to troubleshoot nutritional plans that are not working as well as how to help people get back on track. This way, even people who follow Paleo, vegetarian, vegan, or any other diet or eating plan can follow their own preferred approach. Additionally, if someone is new to an eating strategy, they can get started on the right path by following these guidelines.
Firstly, whenever coaching or training anyone a coach must be patient, careful, and empathetic in order to get them to buy into anything. A coach or trainer must listen to the client’s or athlete’s needs and goals, learn how they live, and discover the things they value as important. To accomplish this, a coach or trainer should work with them to individualize an approach that is unique and specific to their needs and desires. Of course, they should also observe their progress and correct them if necessary. When clients or athletes struggle nutritionally, or want to improve their diet, the following are a few steps to help get them back on track.

**STEP #1: IDENTIFY AND REMOVE DEFICIENCIES**

When people look to start eating better they often believe they need a complete lifestyle overhaul. The problem with this complete overhaul is that most of the time it does not fix what is hindering progress, so the same issues will continue to plague them. Surprisingly, people often struggle with the results not because of their entire eating lifestyle, but due to a dietary deficiency. A dietary deficiency could result from not getting certain nutrients or not having the appropriate amounts of nutrients.

**HOW COMMON ARE DIETARY DEFICIENCIES?**

A recent study revealed that it is very difficult to avoid a dietary deficiency from eating just food alone. By analyzing 70 athlete’s diets, this study showed that every single person was deficient in three or more nutrients while some were deficient in up to 15 different nutrients. The most common deficiencies found were iodine, vitamin D, vitamin E, zinc, and calcium (5). Another recent study also showed that diets such as Atkins, South Beach, and the DASH diet are linked with deficiencies in biotin, vitamin D, vitamin E, chromium, iodine, and molybdenum (2).

With deficiencies being so common, the chances are likely that most people have at least one. Not having enough essential nutrients can result in altered energy levels, appetite, strength, endurance, and mood (1). A dietary deficiency could be a possible explanation for when someone does “everything right” in terms of following their diet but still do not get the positive results. In order to live a healthy lifestyle each and every dietary deficiency needs to be addressed and eliminated.

**WHAT ARE THE MOST COMMON NUTRIENT DEFICIENCIES?**

New clients often experience deficiencies in water, vitamins and minerals, protein, and essential fatty acids (1). While this may seem daunting to fix, simply staying hydrated, eating more foods that are high in protein and essential fatty acids, and consuming more of the vitamins or minerals that they lack is usually the best way to improve their nutritional health. This could also help them to feel better and more motivated, improve their workouts, and help them to lose fat and gain lean mass.

**THE POWER OF REMOVING NUTRIENT DEFICIENCIES**

Research has shown that providing fish oil and a multivitamin to prison inmates reduces aggressive and violent behavior by 35% and decreases antisocial behavior by 26% (4). Other research has shown that giving children fish oil and a multivitamin improves both their behavior and intelligence scores (3).

**STEP #2: ADJUST FOOD TYPE AND AMOUNT**

The best strategy to keep track of one’s dietary consumption when planning meals is not always through the simple use of math. While we know that total calorie intake matters, the counting calories method is rarely useful or productive because it forces individuals to ignore the powerful hunger and fullness signs that the body provides. Instead, learning how to listen to their body’s needs can lead to a long-term healthy lifestyle. Additionally, research has shown that calorie counting is not always very accurate (6). Due to incorrect labeling, laboratory errors, and differences in food quality and preparation, calorie counts recorded on food labels and websites can be off by as much as 25% in some instances (6).

Instead of getting technical with measuring and counting calories, simply using your own hands as a measuring device can be a great way to track the consumption of foods. Below is a recommendation of portions of foods to eat by using the measurements of palms, fists, cupped handfuls, and thumbs.

**Men might begin by eating:**

- 2 palms of protein-rich foods with each meal
- 2 fists of vegetables with each meal
- 2 cupped handfuls of carbohydrate-rich foods with most meals
- 2 thumbs of fat-rich foods with most meals

**Women might begin by eating:**

- 1 palm of protein-rich foods with each meal
- 1 fist of vegetables with each meal
- 1 cupped handful of carbohydrate-rich foods with most meals
- 1 thumb of fat-rich foods with most meals

This eating template is designed for consumption of four meals per day; however, it is merely a starting point, an actual nutrition program should be individualized to the specific person. The nutrition plan should be flexible since there is no way to plan for how each person reacts to new consumption habits. Individuals should be able to adjust meal frequency and portion sizes based on their hunger, fullness, activity level, needs, and results. For
example, if an individual wants to gain more lean mass, they could add either an extra handful of carbohydrates or another thumb of fat to their meals. Likewise, if the goal is to lose body fat, a client could remove a handful of carbohydrates or a thumb of fat from several meals. The important thing to remember is that assessments and adjustments are necessary to make sure the nutrition program is right for each individual.

**STEP #3: ADJUST FOOD AND MACRONUTRIENT COMPOSITION**

For many, simply eliminating their nutrient deficiencies and eating quality and properly portioned food is all that is required to get them on track with a healthy eating regimen. However, this is not always the case. Sometimes people need to do more than just these adjustments alone. For anyone who wishes or needs to go further with their nutrient planning, the last step is to regulate macronutrient composition. In order to determine how to adjust an individual’s macronutrient composition it is helpful to classify them into one of the three general body type classifications, or somatotypes: ectomorph, mesomorph, or endomorph (1).

**NUTRITION FOR ECTOMORPHS**

Ectomorphic people are categorized by being relatively thin and having small bone structure and thin limbs. Oftentimes they will have a fast metabolic rate and will be able to burn excess calories by naturally moving around constantly. Therefore, they generally have a higher carbohydrate need and often do best with more carbohydrates in the diet, along with moderate protein and lower fat intake (1). A basic recommendation is provided below as a nutritional guideline for ectomorphs.

Ectomorphic men begin by eating:
- 2 palms of protein-rich foods
- 2 fists of vegetables
- 3 cupped handfuls of carbohydrate-rich foods
- 1 thumb of fat-rich foods

Ectomorphic women begin by eating:
- 1 palm of protein-rich foods
- 1 fist of vegetables
- 1.5 cupped handfuls of carbohydrate-rich foods
- 0.5 thumb of fat-rich foods

**NUTRITION FOR MESOMORPHS**

Mesomorphic people tend to have an athletic body with an average sized bone structure. Mesomorphs often have a lot of lean mass and usually have an easy time staying lean and gaining muscle. They generally do best on a mixed diet, with balanced carbohydrates, proteins, and fats (1). Below is a recommended starting point for what each meal might look like for mesomorphs.

Mesomorphic men begin by eating:
- 2 palms of protein-rich foods
- 2 fists of vegetables
- 2 cupped handfuls of carbohydrate-rich foods
- 2 thumbs of fat-rich foods

Mesomorphic women begin by eating:
- 1 palm of protein-rich foods
- 1 fist of vegetables
- 1 cupped handful of carbohydrate-rich foods
- 1 thumb of fat-rich foods

**NUTRITION FOR ENDOMORPHS**

In comparison to the other somatotypes, endomorphs are generally larger in bone structure and tend to have more body and fat mass. Especially if they are sedentary, endomorphs often have metabolic rates that are slower than average and usually do not need large amounts of carbohydrates. Therefore, endomorphs generally do best with a higher fat and protein intake and, especially after exercise, need less carbohydrate intake (1). Nutritional guidelines for meal proportions specifically designed for endomorphs are provided below.

Endomorphic men begin by eating:
- 2 palms of protein-rich foods
- 2 fists of vegetables
- 1 cupped handful of carbohydrate-rich foods
- 3 thumbs of fat-rich foods

Endomorphic women begin by eating:
- 1 palm of protein-rich foods
- 1 fist of vegetables
- 0.5 cupped handful of carbohydrate-rich foods
- 1.5 thumbs of fat-rich foods
FEATURE ARTICLE

THREE STEPS TO HELP CLIENTS AND ATHLETES GET THEIR EATING ON TRACK

SUMMARY
Nutritional planning is a process that includes adaptations and changes brought about from personal responses. When these three steps are applied to anyone, especially in sequence, it should be able to help jumpstart a healthier nutritional lifestyle. Not only are these recommendations useful for a beginner, but also for anyone who is not getting the results they desire with their current nutritional programming.

REFERENCES


ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Brian St. Pierre is a registered dietitian, has a Master’s degree in Nutrition from the University of Maine, and is a Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist® (CSCS®). He worked at Cressey Performance as the Head Sports Nutritionist and as the Strength and Conditioning Coach for three years. Currently he is a full-time coach and nutrition educator at Precision Nutrition (www.precisionnutrition.com).

John Berardi is a founder of Precision Nutrition (www.precisionnutrition.com) and is an advisor to Apple, Equinox, Nike, and Titleist. Berardi has authored columns at Livestrong and the Huffington Post, and was recently selected as one of the 20 smartest fitness professionals in the world. Each year, his Precision Nutrition team coaches small groups of fitness professionals through the renowned Precision Nutrition Level 1 and 2 certification programs.