

# Elimination Diets – Benefits, Risks and Options

An elimination diet is a diagnostic process to determine whether food impacts health. If the diet improves well-being, each food is systematically challenged to determine if any are problematic.

## Benefits

Food hypersensitivity plays a role in some medical conditions. Identifying those foods can substantially improve your quality of life. Additionally, if you suspect food is bothering you, and an elimination diet is not helpful, you can dismiss your suspicions.

## Risks

### Commitment

Changing your diet can be stressful and time-consuming, and specialty foods may be expensive. To get the most out of the process, you must follow the restrictions diligently.

### Unnecessary Restrictions

When people feel better on the initial elimination diet, they may continue with it long-term because they do not want to chance increased symptoms through food reintroduction. This approach may be easier in the short term, but it can create long-term challenges, such as:

- Reduced pleasure from favourite meals
- Social isolation if you avoid eating out
- Vicious cycle of restriction and worsening symptoms (the [Conditioned Food Avoidance and Sensitivity Trap](#)) which creates food and symptom hypervigilance.
- Depression and anxiety

For these reasons, food challenges are essential to minimize unnecessary restrictions.

### Improved Wellbeing May Not be Related to the Restriction

Many people feel better on an elimination diet for reasons unrelated to the restriction, including, but not limited to:

- **Healthier diet:** Most people's diets are poorly balanced—they skip meals, consume highly processed foods, etc. Clients who restrict their diets pay more attention and may adopt healthier patterns.
- **Placebo effect:** The placebo (thinking something will help you) and nocebo effect (thinking something will harm you) are powerful neurobiological forces.
- **Treatment effect:** Personalized support from a caring health professional can make you feel better independent of the dietary restriction.

- **Natural fluctuations:** Symptoms wax and wane for unknown reasons. People usually make changes (such as an elimination diet) when their symptoms peak, and they may have felt better without intervention.

## Food and Symptom Hypervigilance Red Flags

Hypervigilance is a state of nervous system dysregulation where your brain is excessively watching out for danger. Elimination diets can create or worsen food and symptom hypervigilance.

If you notice these warning signs, contact your dietitian or doctor. With early recognition, you can break out quickly. The longer you stay trapped, the worse your food restrictions may become, and it will be more challenging to return to a peaceful relationship with food and your body.

- **Hesitant to start the food challenge phase:** The elimination phase is not the end goal! The food challenge phase is essential to liberalize your diet.
- **Paying more attention to sensations in your body:** We have constant sensations in every body part, but the brain only notices certain ones. If you are caught in symptom hypervigilance, your brain will pay excessive attention to sensations in body parts you are concerned about and may interpret those sensations as dangerous symptoms.
- **Excessive or suspicious thoughts about food:** Frequent thoughts about the potential danger of eating certain foods are a key warning sign.
- **Frequent food-related research:** Research includes internet searching, online groups, booking appointments with health professionals, health testing, etc.
- **Emotional or physical tension related to food:** Tension when you eat or think about food indicates that food has become a stress trigger.

## Options

People often adopt dramatic changes (like elimination diets) to feel better. Unfortunately, the power of small movements toward a more balanced life is often dismissed.

Ideally, trying simple changes before embarking on an elimination diet is best, such as:

- Eating at regular mealtimes.
- Eating slowly and chewing well.
- Gentle, diaphragmatic breathing for a few minutes before and after meals (and throughout the day), especially if digestive discomfort is the primary concern.
- Responding, rather than reacting, to unpleasant sensations.
- Engaging in relaxation practices.