



Eight Ideas for a New Year's Resolution Worth Keeping

New Year's resolutions, the skeptics say, are made to be broken. What if you could prove the skeptics wrong by making a resolution you can actually keep?

Instead of a grand gesture, total abstinence from sweets or quitting a bad habit cold turkey at the stroke of midnight January 1, try making a resolution that's ambitious yet eminently attainable — a financial resolution.

"The important thing with a resolution is how you define it," said Molly Balunek, CFP®, at Inverness Advisers in Beachwood, Ohio. "That means defining it narrowly enough that it's achievable. You want to avoid being so ambitious that it's self-defeating."

Here are eight achievable yet impactful financial resolutions worth considering:

- 1. Track household spending.** "This is a real game-changer," said Balunek, and perhaps the most important step a person can take toward gaining control of their financial situation. Track spending the old-fashioned way, with pencil and paper or use software systems like Quicken, FinanceWorks™ or Mint.
- 2. Save \$X per week/month/pay period.** Rather than merely resolving to "save more," commit to setting aside a specific amount during a specific time period. If you don't have a savings account, open one that offers a decent interest rate.
- 3. Develop and follow a spending plan.** A resolution to "spend less" is too general, said Balunek. Instead, figure out exactly how much you take in and how you need each month to cover expenses. The difference determines how much you can set aside for retirement, education, vacation and emergencies.
- 4. Recognize that it is never too early to start saving for retirement.** If your employer doesn't offer a 401(k) or other type of plan, open an individual retirement account (IRA) yourself. Setting aside even one or two percent more per month now can add up to a much bigger nest egg later.

- 5. Meet with a financial planner.** It pays to have an expert objectively examine your entire financial picture, then provide actionable ideas and advice to help you meet your goals and obligations. Find a financial planner in your area via the Financial Planning Association's national database at www.FPAnet.org/PlannerSearch/PlannerSearch.
- 6. Develop and follow a debt management plan.** Assess how much debt you're carrying, then commit to paying down that debt by a specific amount each month.
- 7. Learn more about finances.** The Internet, library and bookstore are full of insight and ideas you can put to work to improve your financial standing. Where to find those ideas? Ask friends, relatives or a financial planner for suggestions.
- 8. Review your insurance needs.** Ask a financial planner for help analyzing what you have and what you need in terms of life, disability, health and other forms of insurance. Also, talk with the human resources department at work to find out about insurance benefits offered by your employer.

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Simple Swaps for a Leaner Diet

Simply substituting skim milk for cream in your coffee can save you 10,000 calories a year. So imagine what five or six small changes will do. Your diet can become much leaner through food swapping and you won't necessarily have to give up your favorite foods.

"Food swapping means substituting healthy choices for less healthy choices, but it doesn't have to be a remarkable change," explains Jo-Ann Heslin, M.A., R.D., co-author of The Fat Attack Plan. "People get nervous about making changes because they see themselves never eating another hot fudge sundae or going to a steakhouse again. That's when they throw in the towel and give up. But food swapping means finding alternatives you can live with."

According to Heslin, when people feel they must give up the foods they like, the process of maintaining a leaner diet becomes a real struggle. But instead of making eating an all-or-nothing proposition, you can learn to enjoy foods high in sugar, fat and sodium less frequently and to eat them in smaller amounts. This is a reasonable system most people can accept.

Benefits of Food Swapping

Food swapping offers long- and short-term benefits. By improving your eating habits over the long term, you may increase your life span and minimize your risk of chronic diseases. In the short term, by eating a leaner diet you will have more energy because you will be consuming better foods with higher nutritional quality. Plus, you'll lose some weight or maintain your current weight.

General Swap Tips

The key to successful food swapping is to start slowly. Make moderate changes in your diet at first. Don't try to tackle all foods at one time. Here are some suggestions of ways you might start:

- **Prepare your vegetables without sauces or butter.** Top them with herbs instead.
- **Reduce your meat portions.** The recommended 3-oz. portion is about the size of the palm of your hand before it is cooked.
- **Replace the excess protein you've eliminated from your diet with more vegetables and complex carbohydrates.**
- **Instead of frying foods, grill, broil, bake or poach them.**

- **Replace sauces, gravy or salad dressing poured on food with a small amount on the side.** Dip your fork tip in the sauce before picking up food, and you'll get the essence of the flavor.
- **If you like to serve cake for dessert, substitute cupcakes for sheet cake.** A cupcake is a defined portion that limits your intake more effectively than if you eat cake slices. Eat your cupcake with fruit slices or berries rather than frosted.
- **Try serving raisin, pumpernickel or cinnamon breads as a dessert substitute.**

Supermarket Skills

Being supermarket savvy is very important in food swapping because if you don't bring home healthful foods, all your good intentions may not be enough to get the job done. Learn how to make healthful substitutions during your trips to the grocery store. Here are a few tips:

- Buy whole-grain bread, cereal and pasta rather than white or refined products.
- Buy canned fruit packed in light syrup or water and not in heavy syrup.
- Choose low-sodium canned and frozen vegetables without butter or sauces.
- If you don't like to skin chicken yourself, buy it pre-skinned.
- Choose low-fat dairy products when available.

