What is Clean Eating?

By Eve Lees, April 2016

There is a growing interest in *Clean Eating*. But the definitions of *Clean Eating* vary widely. And there doesn't seem to be any standard for this eating practice. There are myriad definitions and "rules." Surf the web sometime and you'll see the hundreds of variations of Eat Clean diets.

And so, because there are no 'standards,' *Clean Eating* is often misunderstood, ridiculed and criticized. But to be fair, the definitions (and criticisms) for *Clean Eating* all differ simply because each advocate has a different opinion based on their own beliefs, formed by their own research and experiences.

My definition of *Clean Eating* will be different from others who also follow this eating practice. My beliefs are based on my training in nutrition and over 30 years as a health researcher/writer, interviewing countless health experts for the articles I write. My beliefs are also based on my own personal experiences and what I've witnessed in 30 years of coaching others.

Actually, I prefer to call this practice "Whole Food Eating." I think that's a more accurate label. But because the term *Clean Eating* is already out there, I'll continue to use it throughout this article.

Clean Eating is . . .

Clean Eating isn't really a diet. It's more a concept or a term to describe the quality of the food you choose to eat. Therefore a *general* definition of *Clean Eating* can be: eating foods changed as little as possible from their original form (the way they were created in nature). That's it. There are really no other "rules." Advocates of *Clean Eating* believe humans were meant to eat as simple as possible and our changed foods today contribute to our increasing poor health.

But now the confusion begins . . .

Now, let's look at the many 'rules and regulations' each advocate created for the simple, basic concept of *Clean Eating* . . .

Clean Eating advocates all agree to minimize or avoid highly-refined or ultra-processed foods. However, interpretations vary widely of what a "refined" or ultra-processed food is. Some consider fruit juice too refined/processed and would rather have the whole, fresh fruit with a glass of water. Yet other *Clean Eating* advocates say drinking juice is acceptable as long as it's freshly squeezed. Some advocates say tofu is a highly refined food. Others don't agree, saying we should eat the whole soy beans instead (which tofu is made from). Some, like *Tosca Reno* founder of the *Eat Clean Lifestyle,* market a few packaged food products. These may be considered refined foods (although they are a better choice than a candy bar or greasy French fries). You decide.

Clean Eating may also involve eating organic, hormone-free, and antibiotic-free foods. This is a valid concern, but it is an individual one based mostly on availability and your budget. However, concerning organic plants, the benefits of eating more plants (organic or not) far outweigh the risk of consuming pesticides on food. Also, there are some plants that don't need to be purchased as organic: Surf for *The Clean 15* or *The Dirty Dozen* (NOTE: these lists are updated yearly).

Supporters of *Clean Eating* may endorse eating seasonal and/or locally grown foods (within 100 miles). This can also be a valid concern, but do your research first. It's entirely your choice, especially if you have concerns about limiting the nutrient amount and variety in your diet.

And many advocates suggest avoiding genetically modified foods (known as Genetically Modified Organisms or GMO). However GMO's won't be a huge concern if you rarely eat highly refined or processed foods, because 'processed foods' include all those packaged, prepared food products where GMO's are likely found. If you feel that strongly about GMO's, find out which plants have been genetically modified. Choose not to buy them, or buy them in their 'organic' versions.

There are also *Clean Eating* advocates who advise not to consume *meat, wheat, gluten, milk*, or *legumes.* I guess it comes down to personal opinion and how complicated you want to make your eating habits. These foods are considered "controversial" because – long story short – some believe they aren't suitable for human digestion. In my opinion, we don't know enough about the human diet or the human body to restrict our food choices. Choosing from a wide variety of foods, and not omitting any food or food group (unless you have a medical reason) is really the only guarantee we are getting all the known and yet-to-be-discovered nutrients we need to sustain life.

We don't know what early humans ate. We have no proof of what we should and shouldn't be eating. There are *usually* two sides to every major food and nutrition debate (dairy-free, low-carb, meat based, vegan, etc.). And when both sides are supported by credible, knowledgeable sources, who is right and who is wrong? Is one side smarter than the other? I don't think so.

After years of researching many controversial issues and interviewing the experts, I find whenever there's a standoff, it's usually because there really aren't any conclusive, hard facts. There are just strong beliefs and strong opinions: interpretations of whatever "evidence" is available. If there were hard facts, all these highly intelligent and knowledgeable people wouldn't be arguing. You'll just have to decide what *you* want to believe.

If you believe humans shouldn't eat grains, dairy, or legumes, fine, don't eat them. But if you *do* decide to eat those foods, choose to more often eat them in their most basic form. Eat cooked whole grain kernels more often than bread. Consume plain, antibiotic and hormone-free milk and yogurt, instead of chocolate milk or yogurt with fruit added (where refined sugar is *always* added too). And eat legumes prepared simply, instead of edemame beans (often rich in added salt, fat, and sometimes sugar). If you want to be a vegetarian, go for it. But focus on whole vegetables, not bags of baked vegetable chips. Want to eat a meat-focused diet? That's your choice. But try to avoid the deli meats and hot dogs. Enjoy mostly unchanged meats, hopefully antibiotic-free. If you must follow the Atkin's Low-Carb Diet, ignore their recommendation to eat one of their snack bars instead of an apple (trust me, choose the apple). Getting the idea*?*

But *why* say 'no' to refined foods?

We are a mass of chemicals. So is our food. Everything in our bodies and in our food work synergistically; nothing can function efficiently on its own. Our bodies are a complex, coordinated network of countless functions. Similarly, every food contains properties that work as a team within the food. The chemical mass of each food construct it to become uniquely *that* food; so an apple looks like an apple, a tomato uniquely a tomato. And each food offers its own chemical mixture to the animals that consume it.

Together, our bodies and the food we consume unite to produce an effect greater than their individual contributions. This is nature's design. But sadly, we humans keep trying to turbo-charge a precise system we'll probably never understand.

When a food is changed in any way, we risk changing its unique chemical structure. In addition, the process of oxidation (exposure to air, light, and heat) may affect nutrient quality and quantity. Many volatile nutrients are lost. And the nutrients that remain become either less effective or more potent within our bodies, due to losing other nutrients that helped boost or buffer their potency.

If you take, say, vitamin D, calcium, or perhaps iron in pill form, it's possible to put other nutrients out of balance in our body. This is a widely-agreed fact that many nutrition specialists caution us about. And we suspect it's true partly because the singular nutrient is no longer working in synergy with other nutrients that would have accompanied it in the whole food.

Therefore, if a single nutrient in pill form can be dangerous in its potency, why can't a changed food, now containing only a few nutrients, also become potent in those remaining nutrients? By changing a food, we risk changing its chemistry and its balance. And we can make it almost too toxic to eat. It's like releasing the bully in the school yard while the teachers are in the staff room.

Changing a food can also affect the remaining nutrients in the opposite way: it can make them less effective in the body. If other assisting nutrients have been lost, those remaining may not be used properly, if at all. This would be like the unpopular wall flower at the school dance: overlooked and ignored by everyone.

To make matters worse, other things may be added to a changed food that we really don't need more of, like flour, sugar, fat, salt, and (in the case of commercially-processed foods) trans fats, and artificial preservatives.

Our bodies are designed to slowly and methodically break down a whole food into the materials our cells need to function. But nature did not design us to digest foods that are *already* broken down *before* we eat them. This risks confusion in our orderly, methodical digestive process (the insulin response is just one example: we digest refined sugar from sugar beets much differently than eating the beet in its whole form). This confusion can create stress. The stress response releases the stress hormones. If you are eating lots of "changed foods" your stress hormones will be circulating constantly. And that is *not* conducive to good health.

It's no wonder we humans are the sickest species on this planet. And the steady rise of diet-related illnesses like diabetes indicates we are getting sicker. Other animals have not changed their diets: squirrels don't drink nut shakes and birds aren't eating worm burgers. Animals in the wild survive on what they intuitively know nature supplied for them. They get sick if they eat human-designed foods (so do humans, by the way, so stay curious about that). But we humans, well, we think we can perfect the foods nature provided us. Yet how do we perfect something we do not fully understand?

As I explained earlier, by refining/processing a food we change its chemistry, losing many of its vital nutrients. We sometimes replace those lost nutrients (called fortifying or enriching), or we take vitamin supplements. But how do we replace the nutrients we haven't yet discovered? We know much about the human body, but there is still plenty to learn. And perhaps we never will.

If we infrequently eat refined foods (I call them "designer foods") our good health won't be compromised. However, refined and processed foods constitute much of our food choices today. Many of us eat foods at every meal that do not resemble their original form and some of these we consider "healthy," like whole grain bread and crackers, red wine, fruit juices, rice cakes, protein powder, stevia, gluten-free cakes and cookies, granola bars, snack bars, sugar-free soda pop, deli meats, sausages, hot dogs . . . the list is endless.

Clean Eating health benefits

Cleaning up my diet has made me a different person from the highly depressed insomniac I was over 20 years ago. Back then, I thought because I exercised regularly, I was healthy. But focusing on my food and making nutrition my *first* priority over exercise made all the difference for me physically and mentally. I'm over 60 and I'm healthier and fitter now than I was in my 30's and 40's. And the only thing I changed was how I ate.

I rarely get sick but when I do, I recuperate quickly. I'm much happier today and seldom feel down in the dumps. I think more clearly and am less emotional. You may say the psychological changes I just mentioned can occur as we age. That's possible. However, there is growing evidence strongly linking poor diet to depression – and other cognitive problems. In any case, it is also common for older people to become depressed!

No matter what your age, it's never too late to reap the benefits of *Clean Eating*. The body is amazingly resilient and can become healthy given the right tools. The first thing my clients noticed after making even just minor changes in their eating habits was an increase in energy.

Fatigue is the most common health complaint today. Earlier, I explained eating ultra-processed or refined foods creates confusion in the digestive process, therefore resulting in a stress response. Trying to digest foods it is not familiar or comfortable digesting is more work for the body – extra work that uses up valuable energy; energy that could have been spent elsewhere, like exercise. Therefore, when you eat foods the body is familiar with and recognizes (like the *whole foods* nature designed us to eat), less energy is expended on the digestive process, leaving more energy for other things – like physical activity *and thinking clearly*.

How to eat clean

Personally, I follow a fairly strict form of *Clean Eating* (yes, I do have a few vices). Yet I would never force anyone to be as strict (not even my own husband), because it's quite possible I don't need to be strict to achieve the good health I'm currently enjoying. But I like the way I eat and I'm comfortable with it. It took me about 30 years to *slowly* transition to the diet I follow and I can't expect others to do it quickly. When I coach my clients, I help them take baby steps in gradually changing their eating habits. And they step as far as they like, always seeing significant improvements even with small steps. It's all good.

If you'd like to become a *Clean Eater*, try to follow the basic concept of eating foods that are changed as little as possible: *before* they were altered by humans! From there, practise what *you believe* about the preparation of that food. Use your own experiences of how eating that food makes you feel (tired, irritable, more hunger?) and what is convenient for *you* to do.

First you need to understand what an "ultra-processed or refined food" is. Basically, it's a food that has been changed from its original form. Often, it's been changed so drastically, that it no longer resembles the original food source. Among the more ubiquitous processed, refined foods in our diet today are sugar and flour – and they are commonly added to every other food that is highly changed (especially the 'convenience' or 'junk' foods).

Common table sugar (sucrose) was once either sugar cane, sugar beets, or corn. But that white crystal stuff no longer resembles these whole foods. Thirty years ago I was called a fanatic because I wouldn't touch the stuff. Today, with new technology, researchers are able to observe the chemical changes in the human brain after eating refined sugar, and found it to be similar as after snorting cocaine. (Now, no one calls me a fanatic.) And what about stevia? Some sources say stevia is more "natural" than table sugar. Yet they are both highly processed: derived from a whole food source. Their natural chemistry has changed, so neither one is really "natural."

Flour was once whole grain kernels or berries. Those hard kernels have to be ground into flour before you can make bread and other baked goods, or add it to other products as a thickener. Can you bake bread with those nutritious hard kernels *before* they are ground into flour? Nope. Therefore, there really isn't such a thing as "whole grain bread," is there? I believe many nutrients are lost, changed or minimized when whole grains are crushed or ground into flour – including the properties of the healthy 'germ' and 'bran' portions of the kernel. So I see no difference in whole grain flour vs. white flour. By the way, 'germ' and 'bran' purchased separately have been separated from the whole grain, so I classify these as refined foods. I'd prefer to eat the cooked whole grain if I want the vitamin E-rich germ or the fibre-rich bran. I believe my body uses them more effectively when they are still united (and not separated) within the whole kernel of grain.

Few people know you can cook whole grain kernels in a pot on the stove, like our early pioneers did (it's similar to cooking rice: one part grain to two parts water). Even after being cooked, those kernels retain most of their nutrients. However, by grinding them into flour, many more nutrients are lost to oxidation. *Especially those nutrients we haven't discovered yet – nutrients that just might be vital to sustain life.* (Incidentally, there are lots of different whole grain kernels and grasses, so don't think just "wheat." There's quinoa, teff, amaranth, barley, rye, brown and wild rice, oats, buckwheat, kaniwa, and many more. They all have their own unique, nutty flavor and differing nutrients).

Highy refined foods also *usually* have a food label, with several ingredients listed on it. A carrot doesn't need a label. It has only one ingredient: carrot. But a snack container of pureed veggies and fruit has several ingredients. Carrots could be on the label somewhere, but likely far down on the list after the added refined sugar, salt, and chemical names too hard to pronounce.

I think I'll just eat a carrot.

Like I said, you don't have to be as strict as I am about *Clean Eating*. But try to *more often* eat foods in their original form, especially foods you consume regularly. Here are some suggestions; Cut down on packaged and prepared foods – unless it's something like frozen fruit or vegetables where the ingredient label shows it only contains the one item, with nothing else added, like sugar. Try to cut down on things like flour, oil, or any form of 'sugar' because these are considered ultra-processed/refined foods. They were derived or extracted from a whole food and it may be wise to more often eat the *whole* food, like eating the whole grain (cooked on the stove) *before* it became flour. And eating the *whole food* the oil or sugar was derived from (think walnuts, *not* walnut oil). Rather than using coconut oil or coconut sugar, enjoy a chunk of whole, fresh coconut. It's delicious, satisfying, and takes time to chew so you can enjoy it longer. And it offers all the healthy fat and natural sugars coconut offers – *in the proper balance and synergy within the whole food*. Incidentally, if you *must* bake cake, use dates, apples and/or bananas to sweeten it. But try keeping those baked goods as a rare treat. They are still highly processed foods, no matter how 'healthy the ingredients may seem.

Experiment with cutting down on salad dressings, veggie dips, sauces, or marinades of any kind, especially if they are commercially-prepared and may contain sugars, fats, sodium, etc. Learn to enjoy the natural taste of vegetables and other foods without dressings and dips. And it's fine to cook foods, but do it sensibly by using as less heat as possible.

Choose what works for you. Make your own *Clean Eating* rules. Buy *Tosca Reno's* packaged products or drink freshly-squeezed orange juice, if you like. As long as *you* trust and believe the food has been changed as little as possible, then you are basically "eating clean."

The beauty of making your own *Clean Eating* rules is it makes you mindful about what you are eating and where your food comes from. It requires a decision making process that can generate an awareness of diet and nutrition and the curiosity to learn more about it.

A big advantage to *Clean Eating*: It's flexible to your personal goals, beliefs, and values. If you believe humans were meant to eat/drink dairy products, you can follow the Eat Clean concept simply by ensuring those dairy products are as close as possible to how they were created in nature (like whole milk more often than chocolate milk!). You can follow any diet you choose to practise – Paleo, Ketogenic, low-carb – as long as you always consider the *quality* of your food.

Avoid being a diet fanatic

Whatever diet you choose to follow, avoid becoming fanatical about it – or you'll be accused of having an eating disorder (*Orthorexia* is being obsessed with eating healthy). There is no need to worry, obsess, or avoid social situations because of your diet preferences.

I do not turn down dinner invitations or panic when I have to eat away from home. I simply make the best choices I can, that allow me to eat as close as possible to the way I prefer. And if I have no other choice but to eat something I don't agree with eating, I'm confident eating it rarely won't kill me. There are healthy food choices almost everywhere you go – restaurants, convenience stores (many sell fresh fruit), buffets, and social events, etc. As a devoted *clean eater*, I can't recall ever being in a situation when my choices were so severely restricted that I starved (well, maybe once, but that's a story for another time).

Avoid forcing your beliefs on anyone, even your own family. I don't. *Well* . . . not any more. *Okay, okay,* so maybe I *write* and *public speak* about it. And I *will* serve my family and my guests certain foods they expect to eat (although "healthier" versions of them) but I don't put them on *my* plate, like buns, gravy, or salad dressings. It's taken me years, but I've finally learned to just quietly practise what I believe *I* need to eat, to make *me* feel good. And by the way, my family isn't deprived of things like 'cake' – I make a decadent 'chocolate' cake full of vegetables (beets, carrots, and zucchini) and sweetened only with dates (*see website link below for the recipe*). But it's still a highly processed food, so I make it only on special occasions when cake is expected.

We do not fully understand our food, what's in it and how it works in our bodies. The only guarantee we have that we are absorbing nutrients properly and getting everything we need to sustain life is to *trust nature*. More often, eat fresh foods that aren't *as* tampered with or changed by humans: whole foods that our bodies can properly process and use. If you must have them, save those "human designed foods" as an infrequent indulgence.

Choose from a wide variety of *un*changed fresh vegetables, fresh fruit, root and other 'starchy' vegetables, legumes, nuts and seeds, cooked whole grains, and natural meat and dairy choices. Prepare them simply. And *that's* what *Clean Eating* is all about.

Eve Lees is a Health Speaker and a Health Writer for several publications. Visit Eve's website to download a selection of her whole food recipes, including her cake!