The Stupid Easy Paleo Guide to Clean-Eating Challenges
Hi there!

If you’re ready to commit to a clean-eating challenge, and you’re looking for some tips and best-practices to get you started, look no further! Whether you’re taking this on solo or you’re following along with your gym community, training partner or your family, you’ll find something here to help set you up for success.

This guide includes short discussions on:

- Why you’d want to do a clean-eating challenge
- Official programs I recommend
- Goal-setting
- Prepping for your challenge
- Menu ideas
- What to do if it goes awry
- FAQs
- Resources

Thanks for downloading this guide to clean-eating challenges! I’d love for you to share it with your friends by having them sign up to get their free copy here. (It helps me keep track of how many awesome folks have received it.) As always, your email address is completely safe with me; I hate email spammers even more than you.

Let’s get this party started!

Sincerely,

Steph, head nerd at Stupid Easy Paleo

Disclaimer:

The information contained in this ebook is for informational purposes only. By reading this guide and implementing any general suggestions, you agree that you are responsible for your results relating to any information presented within. I cannot guarantee the outcome of following the advice provided and my statements about the potential outcome are expressions of opinion only. Following the advice provided is at your own risk.

Clean-Eating Challenges Guide c Stephanie Gaudreau 2013. All rights reserved. No unauthorized editing, copying or distribution.
**Why a Clean-Eating Challenge?**

People take on clean-eating challenges for different personal reasons: trying to get back on track with healthier food after falling off the wagon, participating in a community-wide event such as with their gym, or just trying to eat Paleo / real food for the first time. The motivation could be to resolve a physical problem—such as losing fat or getting control over blood sugar swings—or psychological / emotional—such as breaking a sugar addiction.

No matter the “thing” that brought you to your clean-eating challenge, there’s one common thread that runs throughout: this is a learning tool. It’s a chance to discover something about yourself, to really pay attention to your body and to see how food really affects your body and mind. Chances are, the program you follow will have some rigid rules, but it’s not meant to be something you do forever. If you’re trying to set the stage for a long-term lifestyle based around healthy eating, you need to take what you learn in your clean-eating challenge and figure out how to make it work for your day-to-day life. That’s the only way it’s going to stick and be approachable. Being perfect for years on end isn’t reasonable, even if you’ve got serious issues to resolve with food.

When you do your challenge, you need to be introspective and pay attention to how food affects you. Perhaps you’ve endured years of “dieting” or caloric restriction. Perhaps you’re a mindless eater. Perhaps your just learning about how to eat for long term health. Many folks find it helpful to journal about the process daily—it’s so easy to treat your progress as insignificant and fail to make connections among issues as they pop up.

Some questions you’ll want to consider:

- Do you have more or less energy?
- Does a certain food physically hurt your body (for example, your guts or joints hurt or it gives you a headache)?
- Do you crave certain foods? When and where? Is there a trigger?
- What’s the quality of your sleep? Is it getting better or worse?
- What’s your mood like?
You can come up with others, but you can see that your clean-eating challenge is much more than just a time to cut out certain foods. It’s a time to look inward and do some detective work. In my experience, the biggest reason why people majorly fall off the wagon after a challenge is because they didn’t use it as a chance to learn, well, anything. They just went through the motions.

**Official Programs I Recommend**

There’s only one, and it’s the Whole30® by Whole9, the dynamic duo of Dallas and Melissa Hartwig. It’s a 30-day program which cuts out certain foods, giving your gut a good chance to start healing and pushing your brain’s reset button about food. They’ve written extensively about the program on their website and in their best-selling book, It Starts with Food. If you’re doing this clean-eating challenge on your own, this is the one I recommend.

Think of it like squeaky-clean Paleo for a month.

I’ve done the Whole30 four times in the past three years or so, and each time I learn something new about myself and my relationship with certain foods. The first time was in June 2011, and it changed my life. Until then, I was totally addicted to sugar—even though I’d been Paleo for a year and a half. I couldn’t shake the hold sugar had on me until I did Whole30. Did it cure me forever in just 30 days? No. It’s always a work in progress, but that experience opened my eyes to how much better my life would be without copious amounts of sweet things in my diet. You can read more about my journey [here](#). What’s more is that I’ve been a Whole9 Envoy to the community at large for over two years, helping folks like you do their own Whole30s.

So why do I think Whole30 is the way to go if you’re looking for a program to guide you?

- The volume of information available. There’s an incredible book, a website chock full of information and an online forum you can join.

- It sets clear, firm guidelines. Other challenges have loose, wishy-washy rules, and it’s pretty hard to learn anything concrete that way. Some will even allow desserts and treats when the whole point is to teach yourself that you don’t need that kind of crap every day. It makes no sense. Whole30 gives soundly rationalized rules that are there for your own good, not to placate your cravings.
• It’s long enough to feel change. If your challenge lasts just a couple weeks, you may not feel the benefit of improved gut health or more energy. The worse your diet was before your challenge, the more time you may need to experience positive results. Thirty days will give you a great jumpstart to actually heal your insides and get your body humming as a fat-burning machine.

• It’s based on extensive research and science. The Hartwigs have done their homework, and they’re huge nerds when it comes to nutrition. (Of course, as a fellow nerd, this is the highest of compliments.) The program also has a strong foundation in the psychology of healthier eating and how foods affect our brains, which is fascinating. Knowledge is power, after all.

• The book has a bunch of tasty Whole30 recipes from none other than the queen of clean recipes, Melissa Joulwan. (She also penned the cookbooks Well Fed and Well Fed 2, of which only two or three recipes are not Whole30-friendly.)

If you haven’t done a Whole30 yet, and you’re planning to follow along with one on the Stupid Easy Paleo blog or even their site, I really must stress that reading the book first is a best practice. It’ll set you up to fully understand the ins and outs of the program. On the other hand, if your clean-eating challenge is set up by say, your gym’s nutrition coach or someone else, you can take the rest of the information in this guide with you as yet another resource.

I don’t recommend radical programs such as juice-only diets or other unrealistic cleanses. You need real food with a balance of protein from meat, fish and eggs, carbs from lots green veggies and some carb-dense veggies and fruit, and healthy fats. Yes, on Whole30—and other similar programs—you’re going to cut out foods like grains, legumes, dairy, added sugar and alcohol, but they’re known to be problematic for a wide range of folks for a variety of legitimate reasons. And psssst...much of the time, you’ll be clueless to the repercussions of eating them until you get rid of them for about a month and reintroduce them if you so desire. Then, you get to make the call if you’re going to eat that ice cream knowing how crappy it’s going to make you feel. Remember, this is a learning tool.

Goal-Setting

One of the reasons people often fail to complete clean-eating challenges—or to apply what they’ve learn to life once the challenge is over—is because they had no clear
goals or intended outcomes. Goals will set the framework over which the entire challenge is constructed. Just doing it to do it is vague and pointless.

Here’s the tricky part: Goals must be specific, attainable and time-dependent to really be impactful. Saying, “I want to lose weight,” for example, isn’t as powerful as saying, “By the end of this 30-day challenge on January 31, I will fit comfortably into my favorite pair of jeans again.” You can even put in quantified terms—such as percent of body fat lost—if you think that’ll help. Just make the numbers realistic for the time you stated. Saying you’ll lose 50 pounds of fat in 30 days is likely unattainable.

Set your goals:

• Grab a pencil and paper—or if you’re new school, your notebook, tablet or phone—and write down three goals for your clean-eating challenge. They don’t all have to be related to your weight, either. Examples: “I will sleep eight hours each night,” and “I will spend one less hour on social media each day, using that time to do something else relaxing instead.” If you want to do more than three goals, that’s fine, but don’t overwhelm yourself. I find three to five to be reasonable.

• Now, write them down in triplicate on sticky notes or another piece of paper, and post them in three prominent locations in your day-to-day routine. It could be your desk at work, in your car or on your bathroom mirror. Look at and reflect on them often.

• Tell your goals to someone else. Sometimes voicing them to the world works wonders because it suddenly makes you accountable.

• Track your progress. How are you doing? What’s potentially keeping you from reaching your goals? What behaviors are getting in your way? Or conversely, why do you think you’re seeing success? Be mindful.

• If you’re a known self-saboteur, be extra careful that your goals are attainable in the time you’ve set. On the other hand, don’t set the bar so low that it wasn’t a challenge. Find the sweet spot.

• You can always adjust your goals as you go. Already fit back into your old jeans? Write a new goal to take its place.
Prepping for Your Challenge

To procrastinate is only human, but waking up one random day and deciding your clean-eating challenge needs to start right this second is a recipe for failure. Planning and preparedness will take you far. Some people—me included—do well with some time to mentally get ready, too. Just like those days where I go for a new one-rep max lift, I usually need to let the idea marinate, to psych myself up before I just rock up to the gym and put a ton of weight on the bar. Maybe you don’t need as much mind-prep as me, but if don’t plan the rest of the details, something is bound to pop up and catch you off guard. Yes, life happens, but there are variables you can manage with some planning.

Here are some best practices (learned from personal experience and working with clients and Stupid Easy Paleo readers):

• Study up on the challenge guidelines before you start. If the program has a book or guide of its own, read it.

• Be up front with anyone you live with who isn’t doing the challenge with you. What I mean is, don’t sneak around or deny you’re making changes, because people will figure it out. It’s better to talk about it then to avoid it because you’re afraid of confrontation. Let’s say you have a roommate who doesn’t eat “clean” or “real food” or “Paleo.” Have a conversation about why you’re cleaning out your part of the pantry or fridge or why you’re not going to partake in Friday night pizza like you always do. It doesn’t have be a science lecture. You could say something like, “I’m eating clean for thirty days because I think some foods are making me feel [sick, less good, not healthy], and this is my way to find out for sure.” Same goes for a spouse or kids. If they’re not going to join you, they may as well know why you’ve switched your morning bagel with cream cheese for eggs and bacon.

• If you’re the household chef, decide whether you’re cooking for everyone according to your clean-eating challenge rules or if you’ll adapt the meal to suit your needs. This is a big one, and will derail your plans quickly if you make assumptions that it’ll all be cool, only to have everyone revolt when you serve them spaghetti squash.

• Seek out a buddy. If you’re doing your challenge as part of a community event, like one at your gym, you’ll be able to do this easily. If not and you’re on your own, find a friend to do it with you. Even if you won’t see him / her, knowing you have someone to phone, text or email for support is huge. It’ll be much easier when you know you’re accountable to someone else. If you can’t find someone, join up with any of the
Whole30s or other challenges when you see them pop up online. The Clothes Make the Girl, Nom Nom Paleo and of course, Whole9, are all great places to check.

- Clean out your fridge and pantry. Purge the whole kitchen of off-plan foods if you can. If not, move your on-plan foods to a specific shelf or cupboard. Don’t let temptation literally stare you in the face every day.

- Restock with pantry staples that adhere to the clean-eating challenge rules. Many of them will be similar to what’s listed in my pantry guide (though not all of it will apply). You can print it out and take it with you shopping.

- Plan out your first week of meals. See the resources at the end of this guide for places to find Whole30-friendly recipes. It’s okay to build in some repetition to your menu, especially when you’re just getting on your feet.

- Have a contingency plan for special occasions. There will always be a [insert special event here] to convince you now’s not the right month for your clean-eating challenge. Make a plan to deal with it. Maybe you’ll skip dessert, focus on the veggie platter, eat before you go or bring a snack of your own. Think about it ahead of time, not when you show up and realize the only food is sandwiches and soda.

- Ask questions of the waitstaff when you go out to eat. Chances are, they’ll be willing to substitute a side of rice for a fresh salad.

- Shop the perimeter of the market, only ducking into the aisles for on-plan necessities. And, don’t go shopping when hungry.

- Have an emergency stash of snacks such as jerky pacs (Primal Pacs are great) or zip lock bags of unsweetened coconut flakes on the ready just in case.

- If you’re training for a sport, plan out what you’ll eat post-workout instead of your usual whey protein shake.

- Don’t skip meals. You’ll be more hungry and likely to make poor choices.
Menu Ideas

On the blog, I’ve got over one hundred Whole30-friendly recipes with squeaky-clean ingredients that’ll suit most challenges. In many cases, you can substitute off-plan components out and still have a tasty meal. For books, I recommend the recipe section at the end of It Starts with Food, Well Fed and Well Fed 2, and Food For Humans by Michelle Tam and Henry Fong.

Here are some meal ideas—enough for one week—from the blog with links back to the recipe online. Truth be told, I don’t eat traditional breakfast foods or even Paleo versions of them—sorry, but Paleo French toast is never as good as the real thing. I eat eggs for dinner and chicken for breakfast sometimes. If you can break your limited idea of what foods are only for morning consumption, you’ll open up a whole new world of possibility. For ease of reading, I’ve put them into categories.

Eggs for Breakfast:

- Hearty Spinach Beef Frittata
- Blueberry Kale Omelette
- Paleo Breakfast Sausage Scotch Eggs (omit the honey)
- Sweet & Savory Blueberry Tortilla
- Paleo Carnitas Egg Muffins
- Paleo Chicken Bacon Mushroom Quiche
- Green Eggs & Bacon

Meaty Dishes for Lunch or Dinner:

- Easy Pan-Fried Lemon Chicken
- Crispy Italian Chicken Thighs
- Paleo Chick-fil-A Nuggets
- Easy Chicken Stir-Fry
- Crock Pot Italian Meatballs
- Crock Pot Mocha-Rubbed Pot Roast
- One-Skillet Paleo Dinner
- Paleo Mediterranean Meatza Pies
- Crock Pot Puerco Pibil (Pibil Pork)
- Coconut Wild Boar (or Pork) Burger
- Paleo Coconut Chili Lime Shrimp
- Mussels with Bacon in Coconut-Lemon Broth
Lamb Kofta
Easy Paleo Lamb Sliders

Veggies for Side Dishes:

- Apple Cranberry Sweet Potato Bake
- Cabbage with Apple & Onion
- Creamy Leek Soup
- Cumin Coconut Chard
- Fried Plantains with Cinnamon
- Garlic Ginger Brussels Sprouts
- Indian Pineapple Cauliflower Rice
- Jicama Carrot Slaw
- Paleo Noodle Bowl
- Paleo Zucchini Fritters
- Ratatouille
- Spiced Butternut Squash Soup
- Stuffed Acorn Squash
- Will’s Yam Fries

Sauces and Seasonings:

- Coconut Butter from Scratch
- Creamy Paleo Avocado Pesto
- Homemade Gingerbread Spice Mix
- Lemon Basil Vinaigrette
- Paleo Chipotle Lime Mayo
- Paleo Ranch Dressing
- Roasted Salsa Verde

I’m really not a fan of exact meal plans, because how much to eat and when to eat it relies so much on your unique needs. I’m hoping these recipes listed above will inspire you to mix and match as you see fit. For example, I’d pair the Coconut Wild Boar Burgers on a huge bed of salad with tomatoes and thinly sliced onion with Will’s Yam Fries—maybe with some Paleo Chipotle Lime Mayo for dipping. Or, maybe Crock Pot Mocha-Rubbed Pot Roast with Ratatouille and some roasted sweet potatoes on the side. Get creative!
What to Do if It Goes Awry

Sh*t happens. Life gets in the way. We make poor choices. That’s the reality of living your life while doing a clean-eating challenge. If you’ve done your planning, you’ll reduce the odds that something will go wrong because you weren’t ready, but even then, things happen. If you’ve eaten something that’s off-plan, it’s up to you whether to keep going—and continue following the rules like it didn’t happen—or whether to start over. Was it a conscious choice—yes, I’ll eat that cake—or accidental—maybe you found out afterward that the burger you just ate had bits of melted cheese mixed into the meat.

No matter what the “slip,” it’s critical that you stop to examine why it happened. If you knowingly made the choice to eat something you weren’t supposed to, what were the circumstances? Were you out to eat? In a social situation where you felt pressure? Didn’t eat enough breakfast and so that donut in the break room was irresistible? Even in a moment of weakness, you still have a chance to learn something.

If it was accidental, mine down to find out why. Do you need to read labels more carefully or ask better questions of the waitstaff when you go out to eat? Remember that your clean-eating challenge isn’t about being perfect for a month as some random quick-fix. It’s about learning to make better lifelong choices.

This can be a touchy point to make, but some people—despite trying over and over—seem to never make it through a clean-eating challenge without failing big time. They’re self-saboteurs and often, the reason for eating something off-plan goes far deeper than making one bad choice. Is it fear of change or success? Is it fear of making it to the end and not reaching their goals, so they eat all the cookies anyway? If this sounds like you, I encourage you to do some serious journaling about your past and present relationship with food. The reasons for self-sabotage often run deep.

FAQs

I cheated with food during my clean-eating challenge. Do I start over?

See the section above. It really depends on why, in my mind. If you were un- or under-prepared, starting overing so you’ve got a strong foundation may be smart.
I had like, no energy, so I quit after two weeks. Why did that happen?

If your diet’s resembled the USDA food pyramid—the base of which is complex carbs—you need to give your body time to switch over from sugar-burning to fat-burning. To make it really simple, if you give your body tons of carbs as fuel, it burns that readily-available fuel source and stores fat. When you minimize carbs by cutting out grains, legumes and processed foods loaded with sugar, your body will switch over to burning your stored fat as energy when you’re at rest. Switching over takes time. For some people, upwards of a few weeks. During that time, it’s common to feel like you have no energy or have headaches or other symptoms. Stay the course.

Why don’t these challenges tell me to eat a certain number of calories? What if I eat too much?

We’ve been drilled that to lose weight, you need to restrict calories, but doing that long-term often has the opposite effect: the body’s hormonal signals get crossed and you end up not losing the weight despite eating less. Different foods affect the body in different ways from a hormonal standpoint. Also, you can eat 1000 calories of crap food and 1000 calories of real food: both provide the same amount of energy but vastly different nutrition.

If you come from a past of calorie restriction, you’ve probably learned to ignore your body’s own signs of hunger and satiation. Chances are you’ve often gone to bed hungry because you “already ate your allotted calories for the day.” Through your challenge, if you’re eating nutrient-dense foods, you’ll probably learn to moderate your food intake just fine. If you’re hungry two to three hours after your last meal, you probably didn’t eat enough.

If after your challenge, you feel like you gained weight, you may need to eat a bit less (because yes, you can still gain weight even when eating “healthy” foods). Other reasons why folks sometimes gain weight: they’ve increased muscle mass or their gut has healed to the point where they’re assimilating more nutrients. That’s why the scale is often a poor indicator of improved health.

I’m an athlete. When’s the best time for me to do a clean-eating challenge?

In the off-season when you’re not competing.
Is it possible to eat too much of a food even if it’s healthy?

Yes. Common culprits include nuts and dried fruit. See 4 Real Foods You May Be Overeating on my blog.

Are there ways to take some of my favorite recipes and adapt them so they fit clean-eating challenges?

Definitely. See 6 Easy Paleo Recipe Ingredient Swaps on my blog.

Why doesn’t the Whole30 let me make clean versions of my favorite treats?

Dude. The whole point of doing a clean-eating challenge is to learn about yourself and potentially, the habits around food that are making you less healthy. Paleo versions of your favorite treats often have just as much fat or sugar as the original. Think of them like wolves in sheep’s clothing. On the surface, they look innocent, but they’re still insidious. Sure, they may not have the gut-irritating gluten or dairy, but they’re far from healthy. A cookie is still not a healthy food choice even if it’s a Paleo cookie. Might they have a place in your life after your clean-eating challenge? Sure. Do they belong in a program where you’re trying to learn about yourself and your issues with food? Hell no. Plus, they honestly never taste as good as the real thing anyway.

For a more in-depth look at treats during your clean-eating challenge, see Why Paleo Donuts Suck on my blog.


You’ll have to decide if any of the foods you cut out have a place in your daily food life. If you reintroduce gluten and it wrecks your gut, well, you may want to wave goodbye to it for good. If you try dairy and some grass-fed butter doesn’t cause any ill effect, consider keeping it around.

Know that the 30-day program is not a realistic way to live your entire life from here, forward. (Learning tool, remember?) You may find that as life continues on, you slip back into some bad habits. Maybe pushing the reset button and getting back in touch with how awesome clean-eating makes you feel is something you’ll do every so often. The visible signs you get or the real improvements you feel are powerful, but even the
best of us forget as time goes by. Maybe you’ll only do two weeks next time just to get back on track. It’s up to you.

Here’s the problem with clean-eating challenges: Some people use them as a way to introduce a permanent, outside structure so they can keep self-control when it comes to food. This quest for food perfectionism is often exhausting and emotionally draining. If that describes you, you may need to dig deeper about why you’re needing the structure of a challenge or program to make healthy food choices in your daily life.

Resources

There are tons of resources to help you on your clean-eating challenge or Whole30. For a full list of books, please visit [this page](#).

Whole30 Blog Articles on Stupid Easy Paleo:

- [5 Tips for a Successful Whole30](#)
- [5 More Tips for a Successful Whole30](#)
- [The Stupid Easy Paleo Whole30](#)
- [The Stupid Easy Paleo Whole30...It’s a Wrap!](#)
- [Whole30 Halfway Point Check-In](#)

My Whole30 Pinterest Board: [click here](#)

Whole30 Recipes on Stupid Easy Paleo: [click here](#)

The Whole30 Daily (daily email subscription for your Whole30): [click here](#)

Nom Nom Paleo’s Whole30 Recipe Round-Up: [click here](#)

The Clothes Make the Girl’s 30 Reasons to Do a Whole30: [click here](#)