



# Trying to change your eating habits? Try this trick

Standing in front of the fridge at 9pm, hungry and tired, is not when most of us make our best decisions. Whatever you virtuously intended to eat that day has to compete with hunger, fatigue, and whatever you're feeling right then, and that intention, however virtuous, usually loses. It may seem like a lack of willpower, but the fix is a small shift in when you make the decision.

## What the shift looks like

Psychologists call this “if-then planning.” Instead of setting a general goal, like “I’ll eat healthier,” this kind of goal setting involves deciding in advance exactly what you’ll do when a specific situation comes up. For example, someone who regularly craves sugar midafternoon might use a plan like this: “If it’s 3pm and I want something sweet, then I’ll have a piece of fruit and a coffee.” This is a plan you can actually follow, because the decision already happened. By 3pm, you’re not making a choice; you’re just doing what you already decided back when you weren’t hungry, rushed, or stressed.

Psychologist Peter Gollwitzer coined the term “implementation intentions” decades ago, and the concept has been tested across dozens of lifestyle and habit goals. People who write a specific if-then plan for their food choices follow through more often than people who just intend to eat better, and it works especially well for adding a good habit rather than talking yourself out of a bad one.

A vague goal leaves the actual decision for later, so you end up negotiating with yourself right at the moment when you’re least equipped to win. A specific “if-then” plan skips that negotiation, since the decision is already made and the situation just triggers it. When you do the thinking ahead of time, the decision is already made, so there’s nothing left to negotiate once you’re standing in front of the fridge feeling hungry and tired.

## Make it work for you

When setting up your if-then, be as specific as you can about the cue. “If I’m hungry” is too vague, while “if it’s been three hours since I ate” or “if I am craving something sweet” is concrete and noticeable. The response needs to be just as specific. “I’ll eat something healthy” moves the decision to the moment you’re trying to avoid, while “I’ll have a piece of fruit and a coffee” removes it entirely. Saying the plan out loud once, or writing it down, is more effective than just thinking it.

## Put it into practice

If the bread basket arrives at a restaurant, ask for it to come out with the meal instead of before. If you want a snack after dinner, have a cup of tea first and decide from there. If you’re grocery shopping and it’s been hours since you ate, have something in the car before you walk in. If a coworker brings in treats, give it fifteen minutes before deciding whether you actually want one. You get the idea.

This approach requires no additional discipline or superpowers. It simply moves the decision to a calmer moment, before you’re tired, hungry, and negotiating with a plan that never got specific enough to stick.

# Freezer Snack Balls



These sweet and satisfying frozen gems are a ready-made “then” for your implementation intention: a healthy snack, decided on ahead of time, for whatever cue sends you looking. They're packed with protective antioxidants and minerals, and are a good source of fiber and protein.

## Ingredients:

- 1 cup pitted dates
- 1 cup rolled oats
- 1/2 cup nut butter (peanut, almond, or cashew)
- 1/4 cup nuts or seeds, chopped (almonds, walnuts, or pepitas)
- 1 tbsp chia or flax seeds (optional)
- Pinch of salt

## Instructions:

1. Pulse the dates in a food processor until they break down into a sticky paste.
2. Add the oats, nut butter, chopped nuts, chia or flax seeds, and salt, and pulse until the mixture holds together when pressed between two fingers.
3. Roll into 1-inch balls and place on a parchment-lined tray.
4. Freeze for at least an hour, then transfer to a freezer bag or container.

These keep in the freezer for up to three months and can be eaten straight from frozen or after a few minutes at room temperature.