

A woman in a gym is performing a shoulder press with a barbell. She is wearing a dark tank top and is lifting the barbell above her head. The background shows gym equipment and a bright light fixture.

III

Guides

Nutrition Beyond the Macros

A guide to fuelling your body well—covering everything from gut health to nutrient timing, micronutrients, hydration, and intuitive eating.

WELCOME TO NUTRITION BEYOND THE MACROS!

If you've ever felt like you're "doing everything right" with your food and still not seeing results, you're not alone—and you're not doing anything wrong. There's more to nutrition than just calories, protein, carbs and fats. And that's exactly what this guide is here to explore.

Whether you're trying to build strength, support your cycle, improve digestion or just feel better in your own body, understanding how food functions—beyond the macros—can be a game-changer. We'll cover everything from nutrient timing and gut health to hydration, key micronutrients and your relationship with food.

You don't need to follow every piece of advice in here to the letter. Take what resonates, test what works, and give yourself the freedom to grow into the habits that feel good long term. This guide is a toolkit, not a rulebook.

Here's to feeling stronger, more energised, and more in tune with what your body truly needs.

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NUTRIENT TIMING

What to eat when

When you eat can influence everything from your training performance to your mood, energy, recovery, and sleep. For women, nutrient timing also intersects with hormones, stress, and metabolic health. While you don't need to obsess over the clock, having some structure helps you train stronger, recover better, and support your long-term goals.

1. Nutrition Around Training

Window	Goal	What to focus on	Practical examples
Pre-workout (≈ 60–90 min before)	Energy, focus, hormone balance	Carbohydrate + a little protein Keep fat / fibre lower for digestion	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Greek yoghurt + berries• Chicken & rice• Toast + eggs• Banana + protein shake (if short on time)
Post-workout (0–2 h after)	Muscle repair, blood sugar balance, recovery	Minimum 20–40 g protein + carbohydrate	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Protein shake + bagel• Chicken wrap + fruit• Salmon, potatoes, veg

Why it matters for women:

- Women's bodies are more sensitive to low energy availability—particularly during the luteal phase (the second half of your cycle).
- Pre-workout carbs can lower cortisol and reduce performance-related anxiety.
- Post-workout fuelling supports recovery, reduces inflammation, and helps prevent cycle disruption.
- For those training fasted, especially early morning, a small snack can significantly improve energy, performance, and mood.

Backed by: Kerksick et al., 2017; Moore et al., 2009; Sims & Heather, 2016



NUTRIENT TIMING

What to eat when

2. General Food Timing Tips

Front-load your day

- A bigger breakfast (around 30–35g protein) improves appetite regulation, mood, and energy throughout the day.
- This is especially useful in the luteal phase, when cravings and blood sugar fluctuations are more likely.

Lighten the load at night

- Finishing eating 2–3 hours before bed helps improve sleep quality and gut rest.
- Sleep is crucial for hormone balance and recovery, particularly if you're in a strength phase or managing stress.
- Stick to regular meals
- Skipping meals or erratic eating can elevate cortisol, increase cravings, and disrupt mood—especially in the follicular phase when your body is at peak performance.

3. Intermittent Fasting (IF) for Women

Intermittent fasting can suit some women—but not all. Women are more hormonally sensitive to calorie restriction and erratic fuelling patterns. Done incorrectly, IF can elevate cortisol, disrupt the menstrual cycle, and reduce muscle-building potential.

Possible Benefits	Considerations
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• May support modest weight loss when it helps reduce overall calorie intake (Harris et al., 2018)• Can reduce meal frequency and decision fatigue• May support insulin sensitivity in sedentary women (Longo & Panda, 2016)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Higher risk of cycle disruption with prolonged fasting• May reduce training quality or recovery• Can trigger binge–restrict cycles in those prone to disordered eating

Might suit:

- Women with low-to-moderate training volume
- Those seeking routine, simplicity, or appetite control

Might not suit:

- Women doing high-intensity or resistance training
- Anyone trying to build muscle
- Those with past or present disordered eating patterns
- Women with already irregular cycles or low energy availability

Backed by: Tinsley et al., 2017; Patterson & Sears, 2017; Sims & Heather, 2016



GUT HEALTH

More Than Just Digestion

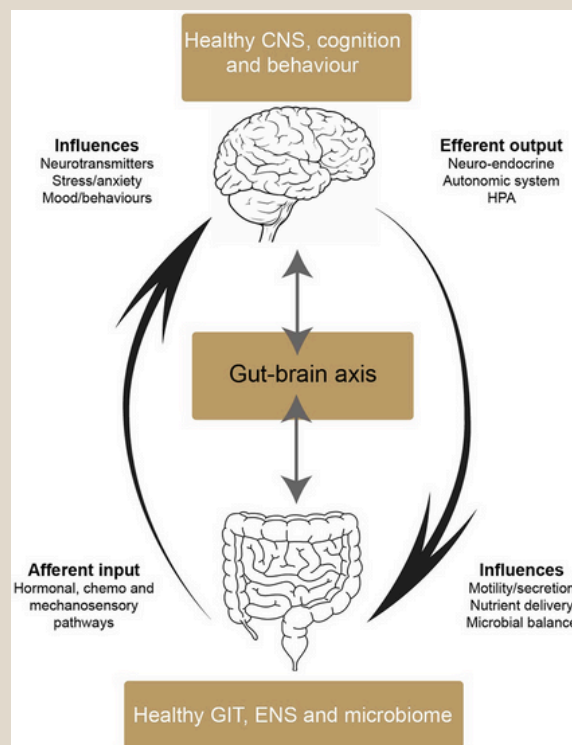
Your gut is more than just a place where food is broken down. It's a key player in everything from hormone regulation and immune function to mental health and energy. For women especially, gut health can influence everything from mood swings to period symptoms to how well you absorb nutrients.

Your gastrointestinal (GI) tract is home to trillions of bacteria — collectively called the gut microbiota. When these microbes are in balance, they support digestion, reduce inflammation, and help regulate your hormones. When they're out of balance, they can lead to issues like fatigue, bloating, cravings, poor recovery, and even anxiety or depression.

The Gut-Brain Axis

There's a constant two-way communication between your gut and your brain. This is called the gut-brain axis — and it's why a bad gut day can often feel like a bad mood day, too. Around 90% of the body's serotonin (the feel-good neurotransmitter) is produced in the gut, not the brain.

Poor gut health has been linked to increased stress, anxiety, and even disruptions in the menstrual cycle, especially in women with IBS or inflammatory gut conditions.



Bajic, J & Johnston, I & Howarth, G & Hutchinson, M. (2018)

Signs Your Gut Might Be Struggling

- Regular bloating or discomfort after meals
- Frequent cravings, especially for sugar
- Low energy or poor recovery from training
- Brain fog or mood swings
- Irregular bowel movements (less than once per day or consistently loose/hard stools)
- Skin issues like acne, eczema, or rosacea



GUT HEALTH

More Than Just Digestion

Prebiotics, Probiotics & Postbiotics

You've probably seen these terms on yoghurts and supplements — but what do they actually mean, and do you need them?

Prebiotics

These are the fibres that feed the good bacteria in your gut. They help those bacteria thrive. Good sources include:

- Oats
- Bananas (especially slightly underripe)
- Garlic and onions
- Asparagus
- Legumes

Tip: If you're increasing fibre, make sure you're also increasing your water intake to avoid bloating.

Probiotics

These are live bacteria that can help rebalance your gut microbiome. Sources include:

- Natural yoghurt
- Kefir
- Sauerkraut
- Kimchi
- Miso
- Some probiotic supplements

Not all probiotics are created equal — different strains do different jobs. If you're taking them for a specific reason (e.g. IBS, UTIs, antibiotic recovery), choose one with research-backed strains.

Postbiotics

These are the beneficial by-products that your gut bacteria produce when they digest fibre. They include short-chain fatty acids like butyrate, which help reduce inflammation and improve gut lining integrity.

Translation: Eat more fibre, and your body will make more postbiotics — for free.



GUT HEALTH

More Than Just Digestion

Supporting Gut Health as a Woman

Your gut is especially sensitive to hormonal changes throughout the month. For example:

- Estrogen and progesterone fluctuations can affect bowel motility (hello period poos)
- Stress can increase cortisol and suppress digestive function
- Low fibre diets may worsen bloating and slow digestion

Try:

- Eating 20–30g of fibre per day
- Staying hydrated
- Managing stress through movement, rest, or mindfulness
- Including fermented foods weekly
- Avoiding unnecessary antibiotic use or harsh detoxes



GUT HEALTH CHECKLIST

How to help yourself

Daily Goals:

- Eat 1–2 servings of prebiotic foods (e.g. oats, garlic, bananas, onions, legumes)
- Include at least 20g of fibre (aim for 25–30g if consistent)
- Drink at least 2L of water
- Check in with your digestion: regular, easy-to-pass bowel movements?
- Take 5–10 mins to slow down when eating — chew properly, no rushing

Weekly Goals:

- Eat at least 1 fermented food (e.g. kefir, sauerkraut, kimchi, yoghurt)
- Try a new fibre-rich food or recipe
- Move daily (even a 10-min walk helps digestion)
- Dedicate time for stress reduction — this could be a bath, journaling, a walk without your phone, or stretching
- Reflect on your gut: any patterns, triggers, or improvements?

Bonus:

- Review any supplements — are they supporting your gut or just marketing hype?
- Notice if your gut symptoms change with your menstrual cycle



INTUITIVE EATING

Rebuilding Trust with Food

Intuitive eating is a self-care framework developed by dietitians Evelyn Tribole and Elyse Resch that encourages individuals to tune into internal cues like hunger, fullness, and satisfaction, rather than external rules or restrictions. Unlike many diet approaches that promote rigid control, intuitive eating focuses on building a healthier relationship with food and body through self-awareness, body respect, and emotional understanding (Tribole & Resch, 2020).

At its core, intuitive eating involves rejecting the diet mentality, honouring hunger, making peace with food, respecting fullness, and discovering satisfaction in eating. Research shows that this approach is associated with lower levels of disordered eating, higher body appreciation, improved psychological well-being, and even healthier biomarkers — despite not focusing directly on weight loss (Tylka & Kroon Van Diest, 2013; Van Dyke & Drinkwater, 2014).

For women especially, intuitive eating can be a powerful antidote to the chronic dieting cycle. Many women have spent years disconnected from hunger cues due to social messaging, diet culture, or inconsistent eating patterns. Reconnecting with internal cues may take time, but it fosters long-term sustainability and reduces the risk of binge-restrict patterns that are common with restrictive diets (Barraclough et al., 2019).

But what if you still have body composition goals? It's a fair question. Intuitive eating and fat loss aren't mutually exclusive — but they do require nuance. If you're working toward a specific goal, like fat loss or muscle gain, you may choose to use elements of gentle nutrition within an intuitive framework. This might look like planning protein-rich meals, eating more fibrous carbs to support satiety, or using calorie awareness (rather than strict tracking) to inform your choices. The key difference is intention — intuitive eating asks you to approach these decisions from a place of care, not control.

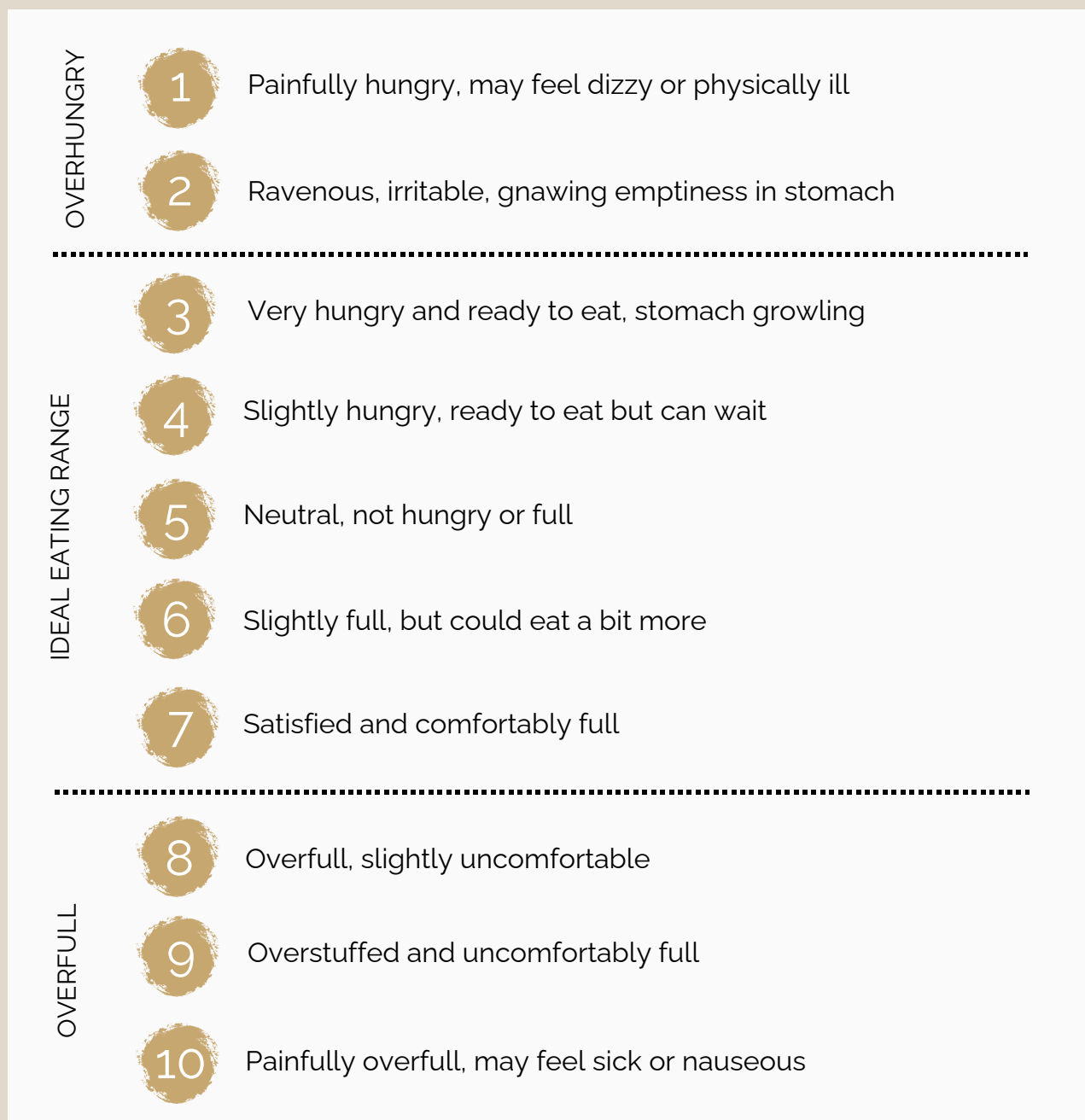
Intuitive eating isn't about perfection or passivity — it's about attunement. It offers a compassionate, sustainable alternative to chronic dieting, with strong evidence supporting both psychological and physical benefits. For many women, learning to trust their body again is the first step toward long-term health — both physically and emotionally.



INTUITIVE EATING

Rebuilding Trust with Food

The scale below will help you better understand how hungry or full you feel.:



The more you use this scale, the more you'll tune into your hunger and satiety cues. Ideally, aim to **eat when you reach #3-4** on the scale, and **stop when you hit #6-7**.



KEY MICRONUTRIENTS

For women's health

When you're training hard, fuelling your body with the right micronutrients—vitamins and minerals—is just as important as your protein intake. They help regulate hormones, support energy production, reduce fatigue, and optimise muscle function. Below are some of the most important ones for active women looking to build muscle and support fat loss.

Iron

Iron is crucial for oxygen transport and energy metabolism, and deficiency is more common in women due to menstruation. Low iron can lead to fatigue and reduced performance, even without full-blown anaemia (Clenin et al., 2016).

Sources: Red meat, lentils, spinach, fortified cereals

Tip: Pair plant-based iron with vitamin C to boost absorption.

Magnesium

Magnesium supports over 300 enzymatic reactions, including muscle contraction, protein synthesis, and energy production. Many women fall short of optimal levels (Rosanoff et al., 2012).

- Magnesium citrate: Good for general absorption and muscle recovery
- Magnesium glycinate: Calming, often recommended for anxiety or sleep
- Magnesium malate: May support energy production
- Magnesium oxide: Often used for constipation, but poorly absorbed

Sources: Dark chocolate, almonds, pumpkin seeds, leafy greens

Calcium

Essential for bone health, but also plays a role in muscular contraction. Active women with low dairy intake or restrictive diets may not get enough (Weaver et al., 2016).

Sources: Dairy products, tofu, fortified plant milks

Vitamin D

Supports calcium absorption and immune function. Low levels are associated with reduced muscle function and increased injury risk (Wolman et al., 2022).

Sources: Sunshine, oily fish, fortified foods

Tip: Supplementation may be needed, especially in the UK.



KEY MICRONUTRIENTS

For women's health

Zinc

Plays a role in recovery, immunity, and hormone regulation, including thyroid function and menstrual health (Maares & Haase, 2020).

Sources: Red meat, pumpkin seeds, chickpeas

B Vitamins (B1, B2, B3, B6, B12, Folate)

Critical for energy production, red blood cell formation, and brain function. Active women may have higher requirements due to increased metabolic demand (Woolf & Manore, 2006).

Sources: Whole grains, eggs, legumes, meat, green veg

Selenium

An antioxidant mineral that protects cells from stress during intense training. It also supports thyroid health, which impacts metabolism (Rayman, 2012).

Sources: Brazil nuts, seafood, whole grains

Vitamin C

Supports iron absorption, collagen production (for joints/tendons), and immune function. It also helps with oxidative stress from training (Carr & Maggini, 2017).

Sources: Berries, citrus fruits, peppers

Choline

Often overlooked, choline supports liver function, brain health, and fat metabolism. It may help with recovery and neuromuscular performance, especially in women (Ilcol et al., 2005).

Sources: Eggs, salmon, broccoli



HYDRATION & ELECTROLYTES

More than just water

We all know hydration is important, but it's not just about hitting a magic number of litres per day. The fluids you take in affect everything from your mood and energy to your training performance, digestion, and hormonal function. And while water is a huge part of the picture, there's more to it — especially when it comes to electrolytes and how your body regulates fluid balance.

1. Why Hydration Matters

Water is essential for nearly every cellular process in the body. Even mild dehydration (as little as 1–2% loss in body weight from fluid) can affect mood, focus, and physical performance (Maughan & Shirreffs, 2010). It plays a key role in temperature regulation, joint lubrication, toxin removal, and transporting nutrients like glucose and amino acids into your muscles after training.

For women, hydration status can fluctuate across the menstrual cycle. Oestrogen and progesterone affect fluid balance — particularly during the luteal phase, where there's often greater water retention and a higher risk of dehydration (Stachenfeld, 2008).

2. How Much Water Should You Drink?

A general aim is around 2–2.5L of water per day, but individual needs vary depending on activity levels, body size, weather, and diet (EFSA, 2010).

A more specific approach is:

- 30–35ml per kg bodyweight as a daily minimum
- Add 500–1000ml per hour of intense exercise, especially if you're sweating a lot
- You can also check your urine — pale yellow is a good sign of hydration

Caffeine, alcohol, and high-sodium diets can all increase fluid requirements.

3. What Are Electrolytes?

Electrolytes are minerals — primarily sodium, potassium, magnesium, and calcium — that help maintain fluid balance, nerve function, and muscle contractions. When you sweat, you lose both water and electrolytes. Replacing both is crucial — especially after intense or prolonged exercise, during hot weather, or if you're prone to cramps, dizziness, or fatigue.

If you're just sipping plain water without electrolytes, you may not be rehydrating effectively. In fact, overhydration with plain water can dilute sodium levels and potentially lead to hyponatraemia (Kovacs et al., 2002).



HYDRATION & ELECTROLYTES

More than just water

4. Practical Hydration Tips

- Start your day with a glass of water — it helps replenish after 7–8 hours of no intake
- Drink around workouts, not just after — aim for 200–300ml every 15–20 minutes during intense sessions
- Consider an electrolyte supplement if you're training for over 60 minutes, especially in heat
- Use hydration tablets, coconut water, or make your own mix with water, a pinch of salt, and a squeeze of citrus
- Eat hydrating foods like cucumber, watermelon, oranges, and soups to help top up fluid levels

5. Considerations for Women

- Hormonal shifts affect thirst and sodium regulation, so don't rely solely on thirst cues — especially in the second half of your cycle.
- During menstruation, if you're experiencing fatigue or light-headedness, make sure your hydration and electrolytes are topped up — especially if iron levels are also low.
- Magnesium (often depleted during PMS and menstruation) also plays a role in hydration and reducing water retention (Rosanoff et al., 2012).



By now, you've got a deeper understanding of what really supports your body—from nutrient timing and hydration to gut health, micronutrients and mindset. But here's the most important part:

You don't need to be perfect. You just need to stay curious, stay consistent, and stay connected to what feels right for you.

Nutrition is deeply personal. It shifts with your goals, your lifestyle, your hormones, your season of life—and that's okay. You're allowed to adjust. You're allowed to evolve.

This guide wasn't written to overwhelm you with rules. It was created to give you clarity, context and confidence. To help you feel more in control of your choices and more supported by your habits.

If you ever feel stuck, go back to the basics. Eat enough. Drink water. Prioritise protein. Sleep. Move your body. Be kind to yourself.

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