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LIMBO

FAST FOOD 30

**Lose weight by eating the stuff
they told you was off limits.**

LITON ALI

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Foreword by Tony Martin

Chief Scientist at Limbo

I've been a performance coach my whole adult life. Fascinated by the interplay of nutrition, psychology and physiology in terms of weight and physical challenges, I've helped thousands of clients over the years to achieve both performance and weight loss goals. Perhaps more significantly are the accompanying transformations in terms of health and well-being, including reversing type 2 diabetes and reducing reliance on medications, increased energy, concentration, confidence and overall happiness.

My work over the last thirty years revealed several things, including:

- Calories don't count - the 'calories in, calories out' idea is too simplistic, it is nutrition that matters
- Ketosis is a natural state for the body, we are all in ketosis every morning
- Being able to switch from using new energy to stored energy (metabolic flexibility) is key
- Blood glucose drives everything - our weight, mood, energy and health

Alongside the science of weight loss, I also identified the key elements of success for my clients. It was important to acknowledge the significance of

them coming into my gym, wanting to make a change. But what made the difference after that was the engagement. The clients that always kept appointments, asked questions and pestered me on Whatsapp were the ones that enjoyed the greatest success. They listened to my explanations of what was happening to their bodies, and why, and learnt the impact of their choices. For those clients who struggled, I found new ways of explaining, and continued to nudge them to make changes. Eventually, in most cases, they came around and also started to see the benefits of engaging.

Teaming up with entrepreneur Pat Phelan and tech expert Rurik Bradbury has allowed us to bring all this to a wider audience with Limbo. The continuous glucose monitor collects real-time data on your energy system so you can see how your body reacts to the environment you create for it - the food you eat, your sleep, movement and even stress. Now my system has become digital and is rapidly growing a membership across the world. You can join us in the revolution at www.limborevolution.com.

I've never believed in demonising foods - people figure out what works for them based on their needs, the food they like, the time they have and their goals. And fast food is a good example. Known as junk food for a long time, it became strictly off limits to those trying to lose weight, only increasing the allure. But with some knowledge and a bit of ingenuity you can lose weight, even if you need to eat fast, as Liton learnt first hand.

While conscientious engagement is important, another key driver for success is the removal of obstacles. As animals we are always looking for the easiest path - and making change isn't easy.

So, we tell ourselves we can't exercise because we are too tired, don't have the right kit, it's raining. Or we can't follow the diet because it takes too much time. These are the excuses we make to give ourselves a get out. With a busy job and young children I know only too well how life gets in the way of a balanced homecooked meal every day. But I learnt that it was always possible to eat well for my body, even when grabbing food on the go, and I share this philosophy with clients.

When Liton started at Limbo we would be dashing between meetings or working long hours together, with no time for 'proper' food. But even in the most mechanised of fast food restaurants it is possible to adjust your order to suit your needs. Burger without the bun and extra patty? No problem. A nutrient-dense, protein-rich meal that will keep you full, fuel your body, and allow you to burn fat.

Living a hectic life and yet still seeing the rapid decline of his pandemic weight gain inspired Liton to bring this knowledge to others. Liton's book is based on the scientific, evidence based principles of Limbo and he says would not have been able to write it without the technology and service giving him a unique view of his energy system. This is the power of hyper-individualised nutritional advice which I hope is in everybody's future.

This book will give you absolute freedom to achieve your goals by understanding and choosing the food you eat, wherever you get it.

Tony Martin

My journey - losing 24 kilograms



May 2022 - 94 kg - 14 stone, 12 lbs



December 2022 - 70 kg - 11 stone

25 kilograms is almost the weight of a sack of potatoes. I remember wearing a 28 inch trouser waist when I got my first proper job in London at 19 years old. Eventually, the size crept up to a default of 32, which I put down to general ageing. The day I had to squeeze into a 34 - back in the mid 2010s - was the day I became something of a yo-yo dieter. I went on meal-replacement shakes and tried all sorts of methods without paying ever thinking about how weight actually leaves the body. It was always a desperate attempt to solve the problem but I felt blindfolded. I was fumbling my way to a goal. I decided that my set point was 72 to 76kg. I weighed 72 when I ran the London marathon. And I managed to stay in this range for a decade. The fact that I had a four-kilo range seems strange in hindsight but yo-yoing just seemed like a normal part of life.

In 2018, my life changed forever when my twin babies were born. After a few months of working part-time to wind my business down, I managed to become a full-time stay at home parent. This has always been an ambition so I was chuffed to go out and buy a whole 'athleisure' wardrobe with elasticated waistbands, ready to hang out at baby groups. It was definitely the most fulfilling job I had - that was until we went into lockdown.

I had planned to take three years out to be full-time with the kids, but I got pandemic-parenting burn-out. Ordering activities over the internet and making adventure playhouses out of the boxes they came in was great fun, but the constant planning, preparation and idea-generation were a bit much on top of trying to look after the kids at home. I hadn't really made any parenting friends due to Covid and was feeling a bit lonely and crap about it all. I decided that I needed more balance and got myself ready for work again.

The transition wasn't easy - I felt guilty because I really wanted to be at home with the twins but I knew that the lack of balance was having an adverse effect on my mental health. I had to admit I was somewhat miserable and I knew my career was the missing element.

I'd had a lot of time to think and decided to start a whole new career trajectory. But I just didn't have the energy I used to apply to work. Throughout my career, I've been able to achieve interesting things and like to think I'm known for being able to produce results, solve problems and do some highly creative work. But I was in a fog. I just couldn't get anywhere with all the ideas I had and this was despite working with some great collaborators. The magic that I wanted to happen was painfully slow to spark.

I know what you're thinking, but it wasn't the sleep – we got the kids into a good routine that helped sleep in the early days. My 32-inch waist had ballooned to a 36 while I'd been rocking elasticated waistbands. I was out of breath by the time I climbed to the second floor of our house and I was in bad shape. I was snoring more than ever so sleep was disrupted not just for me but also for my partner. On top of this, I started to have various health problems from skin issues to migraines as I was suffering from general inflammation. When I finally willed myself to get on a scale, I was shocked to see I'd broken the 90kg barrier.

It shouldn't have been a surprise. I was eating terribly. Up at 4.30am to get ready for the kids, I was trying to fill up my fuel tank immediately with whatever cereal I could find so I'd have enough energy. I'd have my second breakfast by 7am - maybe some toast and a banana. By 9am, I'd tell myself it was OK to snack on Monster Munch because it was realistically lunch time on my body clock. I was trying to eat low-fat-everything and count the calories as I went. I'd Hoover up the kids' leftovers and make what I thought were healthy meals in the evening. I only ate meat once or twice a week and I ate a lot of meat substitutes in another attempt to be healthy.

While I was slowly getting heavier, I saw something my old boss from 10 years ago was up to and gave him a call to hear about it. It resonated. He explained what type 2 diabetes actually was and I realised that I'd just assumed it was something genetic. This one conversation made me face that I may well be destined for the same diagnosis as my mother but not because of our genes. I immediately panicked that I was at least pre-diabetic if not worse.

At this point, I was in the process of having investigations into why I was

suddenly having constant migraines. These weren't headaches but attacks that made me go almost completely blind. I was out of action for days at a time, would recover for just days then have the next one immediately after. I wasn't able to look after my kids; I couldn't drive anywhere and I was in a state. I was given a cocktail of drugs and immediately started to put on more weight. I took action by buying smart scales and started using meal replacements and a nutrition tracking app. I was desperate for positive results but all that happened was I watched my weight creep up gradually. It was soul destroying.

I did start to make some progress after I gave up the drugs. These included beta-blockers, which I have since heard are associated with sudden weight gain. I got up to 94.3 kg at my heaviest (thank, smart scales) and was miserable about it. It impacted every aspect of my life from my ability to parent to my ability to problem solve for work. I want you to understand though that I have always worked really hard at losing weight. The many methods I have tried over the years include:

- Quitting sugar
- Couch to 5k
- Cycling 10 miles a day
- Reduced bread and pasta diet
- Several gym classes and memberships
- Meal replacement shakes
- Calorie counting
- Nutrition logging apps
- Intermittent fasting
- Bulletproof coffee
- 15,000+ steps a day
- Smart scales

Some of them worked, some of them did the opposite - I put on weight when I tried Huel. Nothing was sustainable. I had been buying cheap clothes for years because I was never sure what will fit next year.

And then fate landed me in a job with a premium weight loss platform, Limbo - my old boss hired me. The life-change was huge. One day, I was a knackered, stay-at-home dad trying to start a new business on the side to fit around my childcare commitments. The next, I'm a full-time executive job with a global team. I'm doing long days and odd hours, doing stressful work involving celebrities and TV sets and I'm travelling most weeks.

Limbo's system worked so well, I didn't believe it was happening. I was losing five kilograms every month and felt great. I wasn't hungry and I stopped snacking. From being a man who couldn't work out how to lose three kilograms and keep it off, to lose 24kg was mind-blowing.

I studied nutrition intensively for nine months, spent hundreds of hours interviewing people going through rapid weight loss, and many more talking to people who wanted to lose weight but were confused about how to do it. I was given access to a physiologist and had some sophisticated technology stuck to my body to help me see the impact of my food, sleep and exercise. I found the whole experience overwhelming at first but eventually found myself losing five kilograms a month without a restrictive diet or an exercise plan.

Central to my weight loss experience was a tech platform centred on continuous blood glucose monitoring. The company had taken technology made for diabetics and turned it into something non-diabetics could use to learn about the impact of food on their bodies. I had a constant, live view of my blood sugar

and gradually learned why this line was so important. The fundamental thing I learned is that we finally have a reliable way of measuring the body's energy system and it's got nothing to do with calories.

Calories are a coping strategy made up for a world that didn't have a way to understand how much energy is in food but desperately needed a simple explanation. Counting calories sounds simple; eat less than you use and you'll lose weight. But a calorie is something that is measured in a laboratory - the human body doesn't understand or count calories.

The process of breaking down food into something our bodies can use is complex, constantly adapting and responding to everything else that is going on in our bodies at the same time. That includes a huge range of factors, including but not limited to: our genetics, our history, whether we have slept well, we are fighting infection, we have just exercised, our stress levels, where we are eating and what else we've eaten.

By using Limbo's wearable tech and app, I was taught to manage my energy input and output properly. This quickly led to me finding ways to burn stored fat. After all, that's where the weight I wanted to lose actually was. I learned to get in fat burning mode and stay there. Then I found 'hacks' to accelerate fat burning, such as having a cold shower at the right time. My waistline showed these hacks worked - I was burning around 150 grams of fat a day.

I also learned that the only thing that made my blood glucose spike are carbohydrates. So I moved to nutrient-dense foods, switching to protein-based meals and reducing my intake of processed foods dramatically. Bizarrely, I found this approach meant I was often eating more than I normally

would at meals. I'd double up on meat portions as I wasn't eating carbohydrates but I was still losing weight. I was baffled at the time, but will explain the science behind this shortly - it's sound and obvious. And I stopped being hungry all the time. I was shocked to realise that I had almost automatically stopped snacking over a couple of weeks. I started trying different foods that I'd never eaten before as my taste buds changed and I found I could taste the sweetness in things like nuts. It was a revelation.

Exercise - or lack of it

Did I mention I lost 24kgs without a crazy exercise routine? I did it without the gruelling Rocky-style montage I thought I'd have to experience - sweating buckets and puking while a drill sergeant barked at me. Nor did I have to go through the kind of pain and humiliation I've got used to seeing on reality TV shows. I didn't need to do any of that. In fact, I quit the gym.

Instead, I changed my relationship with exercise. I started moving more, not necessarily because I was told to, but it felt like my body was asking me to. I took the stairs instead of the escalator for example. It was something I had done for years, until my lifestyle short-circuited. Leaning on the team of experts I had at my disposal at work, I also learned that the timing of exercise was more important than the amount and intensity. That's not time on the clock, but timing according to what your physiology and metabolism are doing. Instead of doing hour long sessions at the gym, where I never really knew what to do so arsed about on machines I didn't understand, I was going for 20 minutes walks, which were timed around my meals. I was astonished at the results.

Eventually I embraced high intensity bodyweight exercises in an effort to build lean muscle. But the experts gave me 5-10 minute sessions to do and made me realise everything I had believed about exercise was wrong. Once I had lost about 15 kg, I decided I wanted to learn to do a chin-up. Just one. I tried and failed miserably. Within eight weeks, I was doing ten pull ups. It was considerably easier to do without the extra weight to lift but I had also learned about progressive overload and the power of making little improvements.

I spent 2022 talking to more than a hundred people about weight loss and nutrition and spent thousands on research. I quickly realised that a lot of the stuff we think we know about food science and nutrition comes from marketing. It's paid for by big food companies and even funded by governments. I grew up in the UK believing – through repeated advertising exposure – that 'A Mars a day helps you work, rest and play.' It was a catchy jingle that encouraged me to make sure I was throwing at least seven teaspoons of sugar down my throat once a day so I could function better. Growing up in the 80s, I remember people would be given Lucozade - a bright orange glucose drink - when you were ill. You might recognise it as a sports-focused drinks brand today (it's now 'proud hydration partner of all England teams') but it was originally sold in pharmacies and hospital visitors would turn up with one for an ailing family member. The drink had around eight cubes of sugar per glass in it and not much else. This is what we were giving to kids to help them recover. Funnily enough, I still crave Lucozade any time I have a bad cold.

I imagine my kids reading the paragraph above one day and thinking I grew up in the same era as when doctors recommended smoking for good health. It seems totally bonkers but I only managed to kick my 'one bar (at least) of chocolate per day' habit in 2022 at the age of 43. I've been eating this much

chocolate since I was a little kid. I worked out that if I'd never developed this habit, I would have avoided well over half a tonne of sugar I've been mindlessly throwing into my system. I get that not everybody took the 'Mars a day' message and ran quite as hard with it as I did, but talking to people about how they learned how to deal with food, I learned the impact of habits was the key. People develop habits without realising. Even when I probed, it was hard for most subjects to work out where their habits had come from though they realised eventually that it was usually from their family life, the environment they lived in and information they consumed from media. Think about your own childhood and what you ate. It will be the big brands that you remember and their big money campaigns. These brands - then and now - are fighting for your attention constantly and the execs behind them are trying to get you into the habit of buying their products. They want your allegiance (and therefore your money) and the best way of doing this is wriggling themselves into your habits. For me, it was Snap, Crackle and Pop; the Honey Monster; Ronald McDonald; and more types of fizzy drink than I can actually name.

Even as an adult, the habits stuck. I was still eating a variety of cereals for breakfast from brightly coloured boxes constantly marketed on TV by quirky jingles and fluffy characters. This means I started the day by shovelling a huge amount of sugar into my system. I did it as a child and so it was my norm. And who doesn't love at least one cereal? You're supposed to have a favourite. I could and have eaten cereal for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

It's taken a long time and a universe-given intervention, but now I've reset my relationship with food. I taste things differently, experience food differently and have no trouble turning down things that are offered to me. I don't eat foods just because they are sat in the cupboard. I make conscious decisions about

what I want to eat using the knowledge I have about how my body reacts to foods.

After all of those years of confusion, it was all down to embracing science and understanding how to walk away from old habits and form new ones. Now you know how I did it, I want to guide you through some of the science that will help you navigate food choices when you're in the process of weight loss.

An urban survival guide

I've spent a lot of time in survival mode. I was definitely in survival mode when I first became a father of twins. I wanted to quickly learn how to help them thrive (just survive wasn't enough for me) while making sure that their parents - myself and my partner - were also alive and happy enough. But as most parents know, there was a lot of guidance and help available. Yes, there was a little conflicting advice but it turned out not to be the hardest thing I've ever done, which was a relief. Perhaps having grown up in a household in which there were six mouths to feed and a tiny business to tend, survival mode is my standard mode.

Even in my career, I have spent much of my time in survival mode. As a freelance consultant and when running small businesses, I was constantly ducking and diving. I loved it though and found plenty of guidance to help me through. And in both cases, success or failure was easily measurable. The feedback loop was quick and productive and professional help was reliable and regulated.

My third big instance of survival mode has been trying to get control of my weight. When you're trying to lose weight, especially if you're using a prescriptive diet, you tend to go into survival mode. And I have - so many times - as I'm one of those people who has tried everything. But here is where this experience has been so very different. When in survival mode both for work and as a parent, I still felt supported and confident when making decisions. Almost every single time I have tried to lose weight, the guidance has been wildly conflicting and incredibly confusing. Over the years, even the science seemed to change regularly - one year you can eat eggs, the next,

you really shouldn't. It made it impossible to follow anything long term not least because trying to decipher what I should be doing was so time consuming. When I hit my all time highest weight, I was starting a new business straight out of being a stay-at-home parent. I was working a lot of hours while still being responsible for the kids. The plans I was trying to follow had to be low on preparation time and work for someone that was on the move during the working day. They never were. Every effort I made to find the right guidance that fit my lifestyle didn't work.

A chance re-encounter that led to my current role changed everything because my thinking changed.

From an art to a science

Over six months of going through the process, my perception of weight loss changed from it being an art for which you needed a 'gift' to being a science, which is accessible to everyone if they have the right knowledge and tools. I first had to face the stark reality that most of the things I knew about food were wrong. This then led to a total re-examining of how I'd got into the state I was in - feeling sluggish, inflamed and exhausted. It was all about the thousands of decisions I'd had to make every day. I was choosing the wrong foods for my body. Some of this was driven by misinformation but so much was driven by habit. With that awareness, the path to undoing my weight-gain became relatively straightforward. The secret of my weight loss boils down to gradual, and eventually massive, changes in habits. I know exactly how to lose weight and how to stay the same weight. The relief I feel in being able to declare this is immense - it's changed everything for me.

But not everyone can be as lucky as I have been - weight loss was enabled by my job. The team behind the process that enabled my transformation is full of genius boffins and sophisticated technology.

However, despite having access to my own physiologist, a premium coaching service and a continuous glucose monitor, I still found that my weight loss process put me in survival mode. This time it was because I had a busy job that saw me travelling constantly and sleeping odd hours. I was having to work out what to eat at airports; on planes; while driving through America; even during 12 hour days on movie sets, and I realised how badly the system was stacked against me.

Early in my journey, I found myself at an airport, late in the evening, with Rurik, founder of Limbo, which was my new workplace. The only places open were a WHSmith store and a burger bar. I was stuck because I knew that everything in either was going to take me out of fat burning mode. Rurik told me to sit and wait for him while he sorted my dinner out. What he came back with was a carrier bag stuffed with sandwiches he'd bought for more than €7 each. I ate the nutrient-dense ingredients while throwing away most of the rest. This exercise in urban foraging seemed like crazy rich-guy behaviour from a successful tech entrepreneur. I was glad to have been fed, but there was no way I was going to live like this! If I was going to continue to lose weight, I needed to know how everyday people like me should cope with this situation. I needed a survival strategy.

I started to ask other people who had used Limbo how they had coped and I was surprised to find that they recommended going to the places I was avoiding - fast food and quick service restaurants.

Back at the office, I had access to all the data these people had uploaded when logging their meals. So naturally, I used company funds to get one of the aforementioned boffins to analyse over 300,000 entries from the most successful members on the system. People were eating kebabs; cheeseburgers and fried chicken - all the stuff I'd avoided by default. The results astounded me. As I started to learn more about nutrition science, it began to make sense. I now had my survival guide to cheat my way through a very weird and hectic lifestyle without losing my way. I ate more fast food than I had for years and I lost weight.

Backed by evidence, written by a non-scientist

Like a Lonely Planet or Rough Guide, this book is designed to help you make the best choices for you in a world of quick service and fast food options. I don't have a degree in anything, let alone nutrition. However, I'm the kind of guy who only gets in vehicles designed on sound scientific principles. That's really the big change I've made to my life - understanding basic science and applying it to what I choose to eat and drink.

When you don't have time to do meal prep and find yourself navigating a world with infinite food choices, you need a guide. The fast food approach isn't going to be the best for your health. Your body needs nutrient dense whole foods and you need to start removing processed food from your life. But you also need to live in the real world and you, like me, might have periods of your life when you are just grafting and surviving.

If that's you, this book will deliver the most realistic way to lose weight and keep it off for good. It is a guide to help you to navigate the world around you whilst, all the while, resetting your relationship with food.



Navigating the system starts with science

“Excellence is a choice. We are the product of the things we repeatedly do.”

Shaq

Page one of a weight-loss plan is where the diet is laid out for you - here are the restrictions on what you can eat, here are the things that you're *allowed* to eat and you set a weight target. But that's not how this book works. It's not a diet - **diets are not sustainable**. I didn't go through dramatic weight loss by following a diet or weight-loss plan. I did it by gradually moving to whole and nutrient dense foods and learning more about how and when to make choices that benefited my body.

You're reading a guide book, a practical aid to steer you towards your goal of better health and weight loss. It's not intended to give you a set of rigid, out-of-date instructions for how to get there, but rather to show you how to navigate your way for yourself.

Fast food doesn't have to mean fattening food

I've now reached a point where I know how to eat in a balanced and healthy way when I'm travelling, but the food vendors I meet along the way don't half make it difficult. I have always found choosing food slightly stressful and inconvenient. But, while trying to lose weight, the stress magnified as I tried to work out what the right choices were. Now that I've spent an intensive period learning about the science of nutrition, studied weight-loss systems and learned how my body reacts to different foods, I have a much easier time of it. And I now understand why it was always so stressful - the system's stacked in

favour of the businesses that create the food we buy, not the consumers.

Food brands are competing for what they call share of stomach. They're constantly studying how, where, when and why people choose to eat so they can compete. They use their knowledge to make sure they are reaching people who will repeatedly buy their wares - making sure they've got the right items on shelves and menus, that the brand and marketing are right, setting prices and even planning the atmosphere and overall experience.

When you walk into a shop looking for a snack, you'll be faced with hundreds of carefully managed and well-branded choices of foods developed to sell. They're tasty, easy to eat and attractively priced. They also tend to be overly processed and way too rich in carbohydrates - not just sugar, but starch that turns into sugar after you've put it into your system. Finding an option that's good for you is hard work, and it's often not the brightly coloured packet that's screaming out to you - that's just the brand that has done the best work in convincing a store that it will be profitable. And one of the best ways to make a food profitable? Fill it with cheap carbohydrate based ingredients instead of more expensive nutrient dense ingredients.

When you visit a restaurant, you're going through a carefully curated experience designed not just to sell the maximum amount while you're there and delight you so you'll return and recommend the experience. You're guided with subtle techniques such as 'laddering' where menu items are organised to convince you to spend a bit more so you feel that you're getting a good deal. You'll recognise it where you see a 'good - better - best' structure, adding supposedly more valuable attributes to different versions of products as the price increases. You're encouraged to climb up the rungs of the price ladder

because you want the best value. If you thought ordering one step up from the 'house white' on the wine list was gaming the system to get you a better deal - it's not. You're buying the profitable choice the business is pushing at you like a magician with a 'card force'.

It seems the same thing is happening with calories as well. Now that all businesses with more than 250 employees has to legally (nonsensically) label its menus with the number of calories estimated to be on a plate, people are ordering according to the number of calories, naturally. We want to make healthy decisions, and the food brands know this and use it to their favour.

When everything's working against you, it's your job to become a competent navigator. It helps to understand some of the techniques food businesses use to guide you towards spending money with them. Once you understand a little about the systems you are contending with, you'll be better equipped to hack them.

The other thing that you really need to know more about is your own body and how it processes the food you eat. Let's look at some of the basics.

Nutrition fundamentals you should know

I don't think anything helped me change my diet (scientific use of the term!) and nutrition for the better more than understanding how food goes from your plate to your cells, but it's complex. Things are never simple with nutrition and our bodies are ready to mess with the theory because we're always in flux. Nutrition science is constantly developing too, so we're constantly discovering new things. I'll give you my version of what I understand because it's an essential part of your survival knowledge.

Food contains macronutrients and micronutrients - essential things our body needs. There are only three macronutrients, labelled 'macro' because they appear in large volumes: proteins, fats and carbohydrates. Micronutrients appear in much smaller amounts and include vitamins and minerals. There are some other useful things in food but they're not essential to basic functions, so I don't think you need to know about them right now - we'll focus mainly on macronutrients.

While understanding nutrients is useful, you need to be aware of how they exist in foods. You don't eat one nutrient at a time - you eat entire foods. You might be used to seeing hypothetical plates divided up into 'a carb' and 'a protein' but that's an oversimplification. For instance, people often refer to bread as 'carbs' but all three macronutrients are found in bread - just in varying amounts. Any time you try to create or apply a binary good/bad system to nutrients, you're definitely oversimplifying things. Understanding the basics will help you navigate more easily and circumvent some myths and traps that are laid out in your way.

How your body breaks food down

1. Ingestion

You decide to eat the food and eat it. You cut it up or bite it into chunks that will fit inside your mouth and you chew. The food in your mouth, and even just the thought of eating, stimulates your salivary glands to release saliva, which helps with swallowing the food but also starts the digestion process. Saliva is also critical in tasting your food. You swallow your mouthful, and go in for another.

2. Digestion

When you eat food, your body works on breaking it down into absorbable components so it can use them. Macronutrients get broken into their constituent parts. This is the process of digestion – chemically breaking the food down – which starts in your mouth. Proteins are broken down to amino acids. Fats are broken into fatty acids. Carbohydrates are broken down to sugars. The breaking down process is done by different enzymes, as well as by acid in your stomach. Your stomach will also move, aiding digestion by mixing the food with your gastric juices, helping to break it down and allow those juices and enzymes to do their job, reducing that mouthful of food into a paste called chyme.

3. Absorption

After digestion, comes absorption. This is where your body takes what it's extracted from the food and absorbs it. Your digestive system is one long tube, from the entrance to the exit, with food being processed by your body from start to finish. As the food moves from the stomach into the small intestine absorption begins. Nutrients are taken out of the chyme as it moves along towards the large intestine. At the large intestine, a number of other processes

recover water and package undigestible material ready for it to exit the body.

4. Assimilation

The absorbed nutrients are carried through your body via your circulatory system, i.e. in your blood. The nutrients are delivered to your cells, where they are used for energy, repair and growth.

You definitely need to know about metabolism

Before I started my journey, I thought the words metabolism and digestion were pretty much interchangeable. They really aren't. Metabolism is the word used to describe biochemical reactions in your cells and, naturally, can only happen towards the end of the process that is started by digestion. Metabolism is the main thing I really want you to focus on controlling now that you've learned what the rest of the process is. How do you control what's happening on a cellular level? You can't. Your best hope is to control what's happening in the *ingestion* stage - your input is going to determine your output.

Metabolism is like a balancing act that leads to your body breaking down and building up both body tissues and energy stores. Advances in nutrition science and technology mean we understand more about our metabolism than ever and have allowed us to observe how the body's energy system works.

Your energy system

You started off as a single cell and by now you've become a massive collection of cells. More than 37 trillion of them. Congratulations. These cells are all constantly looking to have the right amount of energy and that's why you're

doing the same - you are the sum of your cells. It's a useful thing to know when you're trying to deal with excess energy stored as fat.

Every living cell is powered by ATP (Adenosine Triphosphate) - the universal fuel of life. It's one of the end results of the long process your body puts food through. Your cells make ATP from glucose, which your body has made from the molecules in fats, proteins and carbohydrates - the macronutrients in the food you've ingested. Glucose is transported to your cells by blood and it's how your body regulates its level of energy - more on that later. Mitochondria do the job of making ATP from glucose. They are a sub-unit of the cell, like little power plants responsible for extracting energy and providing power for an individual cell. You can forget about ATP now, let's focus on glucose.

Glucose is your body's preferred source of energy because it's direct. Your body works hard to maintain about a teaspoon of sugar in your entire system. When you put more in, your blood sugar is quickly raised and your body uses insulin to regulate this level back down. Insulin carries the excess energy to your storage facilities. You can store glucose in the form of glycogen. That's kept in your muscles and liver but when these stores are full you start to turn the excess energy into fat. Fat is stored in cells all over your body, not just your belly and places that you might expect. I was surprised to discover when looking at old photos of me that I was storing fat on my hands. I've interviewed several people who have had to buy new shoes after a large amount of weight loss because their feet were storing fat. It just shows how amazingly good the human body is at looking after itself.

Did that last sentence sound weird? If excess weight is bad, how can the body be trying to keep fat? Let's have a look at why your body is clinging on to that

fat – stored energy – in the first place.

Stone-age hardware

Our bodies evolved to take advantage of the natural feast and famine cycle that was present when humans were hunter-gatherers. When food was in plenty we'd eat, and our bodies would store excess energy for times when food was scarcer. If you didn't manage to find food one day you wouldn't immediately die because your body was able to call upon stored energy to keep your life processes going.

Carbohydrate rich foods like berries, honey, root vegetables, etc, are energy dense, and our bodies reward us when we consume them with a little dopamine hit, which feels nice. So we go looking for more. As hunter-gathers these were harder to find in large quantities than protein sources. In the modern world, carbohydrate rich foods are very easy to find, but our bodies still behave as if they were a scarce food source. When you eat them, your brain rewards you. So it's a very natural, and necessary, process for your body to take in energy and store any excess for potential use later. In the modern world food is highly abundant and requires minimal energy to gather. It's very easy to take in excess energy, so our bodies do what they do naturally - they store it for a famine period that never arrives.

Let's talk about calories

When we talk about energy, do we mean calories? Well, yes and no.

We see calories referred to every day, but what does the word really mean? A calorie is the amount of energy it takes to heat up one gram of water by one degree centigrade. The unit was made up by a scientist who created a system for estimating energy levels in food.

Calories in food were worked out using a machine called a 'bomb calorimeter' which had food inserted and burned in a chamber surrounded by water. The resulting heat energy warmed up the water. This generated a calculation of how many calories were in the burnt food. It's a flawed measurement of the energy potential in food because your body isn't a bomb calorimeter.

The way that you process food can change throughout the day, week, month or year. If you eat exactly the same morsel of food in the morning compared to in the evening, your body may get more or less energy from it. If you have a stressful day tomorrow and eat the same thing, you could get a different result again. Your body is forever adapting with every breath you take to your current situation. After all, you are just a collection of cells and always in flux.

Throw in the fact that food labelling is allowed a fairly wide margin of error on its calorie statements and you'll see why calorie counting is complete nonsense. You need to use more energy than you take in to lose weight. Using calories as a guide, you could lose weight by eating one slice of cake every day. However, the nutritional value of cake is poor and you'll likely suffer health consequences.

So while calories give an indication of how energy dense food might be - the potential energy within it - using that number to plan out a crafted diet is counterproductive and misguided.

Ketosis is not a trend, it's just a process

In general, all weight loss occurs by the natural process of ketosis. Ketosis occurs when the body does not have direct access to energy - such as from carbs and sugars that you have recently eaten - and so starts generating its own energy from fat and muscle tissue.

It's completely natural and you enter a state of ketosis when you sleep overnight.

You may have heard of diet and exercise plans using the word “keto” as though it's some sort of mystic state that only these plans can get you into. The fact is, if we think of losing weight as actually losing fat then ketosis *is* the process of losing weight. It's an intrinsic part of the process. Carbohydrates will give your body an immediate source of energy to use. When your body sees this energy, it immediately switches from using fat to using the sugars released by the carbohydrates. You exit ketosis and your fat burning stops until your body has adequately used up all of the carbohydrate energy.

Reducing or removing the amount of carbohydrates you consume can help to keep you in a state of ketosis for longer. You can be in this state all day with careful management, meaning that with every breath you take throughout the day, you are using up fat tissue and losing weight.

The science of fast-food weight loss

We know that our bodies run on glucose and store and release fat to manage energy, but you need nutrition, not just energy. You could eat pure sugar to simply fuel your body with energy, but that would mean your cells don't get the other essential nutrients they need, then die.

Here's a stupidly long word that changed my life: *gluconeogenesis*. While your body needs you to find protein and fat in food because it can't produce its own - it can actually produce carbohydrate and does so in the process of energy management. That's gluconeogenesis - creation of new glucose.

Carbohydrates are a non-essential nutrient. Protein and fat are classed as essential nutrients because they contain compounds that your body needs such as amino and fatty acids. Understanding this process gave me a bit of confidence when I was worried I'd crash from hunger and realised that was a learned response to the way my metabolism used to work.

Most carbohydrates are broken down into glucose, which your body uses as a preferred energy source. It's the starch that's a problem. To make this matter complicated, fibre is also a carbohydrate, but it's not broken down by the body. It's passed through the system and helps keep your digestive tract health. Most people don't get enough of it. When I refer to the carbohydrates you need to reduce, I'm talking about what's mostly available when you buy food - you're not getting your fibre from chips. Refining carbohydrates reduces the fibre in food which is why wholewheat flour is considered healthier than white. But brown bread is still full of starch that your body will quickly convert to glucose. I know it's a minefield. In the quick-service world, I look for green leafy vegetables as much as possible and take a fibre supplement every day.

The underlying science behind losing weight while eating fast food is reducing or removing carbohydrates from the food you choose. You've got to hack the menus of fast food outlets and adjust the meals to centre on protein. Typical fast food contains a lot of carbohydrates so you get that lovely dopamine hit when you eat it, making you want more. If you want more, you'll keep spending money and the fast-food businesses flourish. However, remove the carbohydrates and reduce the meals down to protein and fat, and you've actually got some fairly good protein sources available to you. If you eat primarily protein, with some fat, then you'll stay in ketosis for longer and your body will convert stored fat into energy for use. That's how you will lose weight.

Your habits can dictate your health

“Death is inevitable, decrepitude isn’t.” Tony Martin

My father, who's always looked terribly skinny to me, had to have a triple bypass operation in his seventies because of his clogged arteries. My mother has type 2 diabetes. They're both immigrants from tiny villages in Bangladesh who didn't grow up with super long life expectancy in mind. Baba has just turned 94 years old, but he's not exactly had the happiest 20 years as his health has deteriorated. I've grown up with this idea that you'll be able to map your lifespan and healthspan by looking up to your parents. Naturally, I was quite sure my future would involve spreading out considerably; having heart issues and probably getting type 2 diabetes. But not all health is determined by genetics. I was seeing weight and diet-related health issues through the wrong lens and in reality, just ignoring them because I felt I had little control over these things. Then I found out the bloody brilliant news - it wasn't all down to fate or destiny. I accepted the fact that I can have a huge amount of control over my body's destiny by making better choices every day. I'm not going to expand on my parents' considerable health woes out of respect but many of them trace back to nutrition (as physicians have told them) and I can see it's down to habits.

Let's accept excess weight is a problem

My work means I meet a lot of people living with excess weight and obesity. I encourage people who go through weight loss not to to shame their past selves. A casual 'when I was a fat bastard' dropped into a conversation is not a healthy way to look back at your past self. You don't need to self-flagellate for storing some fat on your body and you definitely don't need to make other people feel bad for doing so.

I hate hearing any person being described as fat. There's no such thing as a 'fat person'. People don't become fat. They store fat. It shouldn't be an identity. Fat is just energy the body is saving for later. You can choose to keep that stored energy or release it. But understanding how to let go of fat was bewilderingly complex to me just a year ago.

When I was living in an obese body, a friend showed me some videos he'd made for Obesity UK. They really opened my eyes to the lack of empathy people have for people with obesity and I realised how damaging weight bias is. I'd never thought about the effects of stigma and fat shaming until then.

Now I'm on the other side of my own big research project, I also worry about the damage that people hijacking body positivity are going to do to people's health. While trying to find Obesity UK's videos, I noticed that the charity's top corporate partner is Novo Nordisk. That's the big pharmaceutical company responsible for a well known weight loss drug. It wants people to believe that obesity is a chronic disease that you need a lifelong supply of its drugs to manage. When a charity established to fight stigma starts pushing a drug company's agenda for it, we're in trouble.

I strongly believe **obesity is not a disease**. It is complex and there are many factors, some of which are genetic. However, the evidence shows that obesity does lead to several diseases and the stats are startling when you look into it. A 2021 report from the [University of Glasgow](#) detailed that in 2014, carrying extra fat overtook smoking as a cause of death. Being overweight or obese increases a person's overall chances of dying. There is a risk of a lot of diseases and illnesses - high blood pressure; stroke, coronary artery disease, type 2 diabetes, osteoarthritis and at least ten cancers including

breast and colon cancer.

Time catches up with you

You can get away with a lot as a young person when it comes to carrying extra weight and riding the blood sugar rollercoaster by consuming excess energy constantly. However, as time goes on, you start to wear out the systems you're using for energy storage and health problems soon catch up with you.

Eating and lifestyle habits that lead to obesity can lead to other problems too. In 2008, researchers from Brown University, proposed that Alzheimer's disease should be called type 3 diabetes. The reason this unofficial term is gathering popularity is that insulin resistance in the brain is now known to be a feature of Alzheimer's.

Your brain uses glucose for fuel. Even though it's only 2% of your total body mass, it uses 20% of your energy. A recent study looked at the blood glucose (BG) levels of adults aged 35 to 50 years old and followed them for up to 38 years. Researchers measured their blood glucose over the years and tracked whether they ended up with Alzheimer's. They concluded that people with higher BG levels had a 14.5% higher risk of developing Alzheimer's. Keeping your blood glucose levels stable in early mid-life is likely to lower your risk of Alzheimer's. Studies show that it's not too late even if you're past that early midlife phase to make a difference to brain health. Just like dealing with obesity, it's not all about food – exercise and sleep are a vital part too.

Food is/isn't medicine

While trying to solve my health problems during the latter stages of the pandemic, a doctor suggested over the phone that I should watch my weight. I pretty much told him to f*** off and focus on his job - making me better. Now that I've come through the other side of a life-transformation, I realise how problematic my attitude was. But I've also realised how that came from a cultural norm. Doctors and medicine are seen as a completely separate from nutrition and exercise - crossing the streams is unusual and often leads to confusion.

I've been learning from doctors during my research and was surprised by how little they are taught about nutrition in their years of education and training. They say that nutrition and exercise are clearly key factors in the illnesses they are treating. It's not the doctors' fault - they've got so many things to learn and there's constant new knowledge to take in. The fact that I was treating my doctor as a medicine dispenser is the real problem. It's a societal issue aggravated by big businesses like the pharmaceutical company I mentioned. Come to think of it, I was treating my doctor more like a miracle worker while he was just pointing out the obvious truth that was sat in front of me because he sees it hundreds of times a month. We could resolve so many of our ailments if we all started with better nutritional knowledge. It's never too late to start learning and exploring.

Middle aged spread is not inevitable

There are so many reasons someone may be overweight - it's not always down to habits and choices. It's a complex subject that needs to include genetics, nurture, education and emotional health. However, I really need to get across something I discovered in my journey: gaining weight is not just a natural part of ageing. You're not doomed to pack on fat as you get older and it isn't all downhill from 40. You don't need to 'fight middle aged spread' because it's not guaranteed. People talk about their bodies slowing down and even their metabolisms doing so. But most midlife weight loss isn't actually down to a slow down in metabolism at all - that's not what happens. As we get older, we get more comfortable in many ways. We're more settled in our jobs, many of us get busy and a lot less active.

Instead of accepting your alleged fate, you have to fight the system that keeps trying to fill you up with excess energy and poor quality food. The choices you make today are building the future you're going to have to live with. That applies to most areas of your life, but when you're choosing the building blocks and power sources for your cells, it's critical.

I've looked into the habits of noticeably healthy people over 80 years old - you know the ones who are still able to cycle or walk up mountains - and found they share some habits. Some of these are exactly what you'd expect and most are boring like taking a walk before breakfast or only eating sweet food as a dessert. My completely unscientific but entirely logical conclusion is you don't get to an active and healthy dotage

by taking **all** the exciting and most convenient choices. You get there by making disciplined choices a part of your everyday life and constantly pursuing balance.

Everything is science

A few years ago, when I was dabbling in journalism, I had a private cooking lesson with TV chef [Cyrus Todiwala](#). He asked me if I understood why my mum used haldi - turmeric - when cooking fish. It doesn't really taste of much, so I guessed it was just to make it look yellow and more interesting. I then received a completely unexpected science lesson in response. It turns out turmeric has disinfectant, astringent and anti-inflammatory qualities all proven by science. Indians have not always added turmeric to food for taste or colour, their approach to nutrition starts with health in mind and has always been embedded in their food culture.

Cyrus, who has run a famous Indian restaurant in London for more 25 years, told me about how India's Thali dish isn't just a curry house version of a bento box. There's a system behind it based on Ayurveda, an ancient Indian system for managing individual health. The plate aims to provide all the nutrients the human body needs in little dishes instead of providing only one or two foodstuffs in a meal. There's a famous saying attributed to Hippocrates - "Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food." This is also central to the ancient Indian way of eating. What cultures eat not only reflects what has historically been available to them but also what they learnt about the medicinal properties of foods.

Although it wasn't anything like Mr. Todiwala's place, I grew up living in an Indian takeaway. Not above it - our kitchen also served the customers and served as a dining room. Our family ran the business and my brother taught me how to cook. He has been a cook/chef since his teens. I remember he used to do little experiments (mainly with fire and food). He has always told me that cooking is science. But my brother has always been a bit of a revolutionary when it comes to food. We all know that cooking is an art. It's only been in my mid 40s that I've realised the true magnitude of what he was saying.

I ended up cooking for a living and will happily spend hours in the kitchen. I can cook a meal for 18 with an hour's notice without concern. But I realised that I had always treated cooking as an art. It was essentially a game of creative experimentation based on other people's recipes, my own previous experience and trusting my gut. Learning more about cooking made me realise that yes, it's an art, but it is steeped in rituals. Recipes are passed down through generations and the rules that people follow are there because they've become conventional wisdom. We don't question them.

I learned that treating cooking this way leads you to believe a lot of myths. We even waste time doing things we don't have to. For example - marinating meat for hours doesn't infuse meat with flavour. Marinating meat is fun and makes you feel like you can cook. But when you look at the science, you realise that it's physically impossible for marinades to get too far into the meat as flavour molecules are too big to squeeze into muscle tissue. So marinating a joint overnight isn't going to soak your meat all the way through with flavour. You would already know that

if you've ever marinated meat overnight though. That's the wonderful thing about science. When anything is broken down to the science, it usually seems kind of obvious. It's not just cooking that is science - life is science. When you start thinking of your weight and health as a science rather than a path fate - or genetics - has already determined for you, you'll find a much more reliable and lasting way to lose weight. If only the science were simple.

Sustainable change isn't about goals

I've realised goals can work against you. Before I started work in the weight loss industry, I was a business coach. I did a lot of work around goal-setting and realised that goals can be counterproductive. What really worked is setting up a system designed to move you to an overall goal. Instead of thinking about a far-away goal every day, you break the goal down until it's in little achievable chunks - small rungs on a long ladder. You reach the goal by getting the chunks done. When it comes to losing weight - losing chunks isn't the way you do it. You have to set a system and use it to reach the goal.

Over the years, there have been more than a thousand published studies of research into goal setting, mainly business-focused. While many of them have found that setting high goals can lead to good performance, it's only recently that researchers are looking into why so many people don't reach the goals they set. There are plenty of undesirable impacts from goal-setting including demotivation to lowered performance. But you didn't need modern research to tell you this - ancient arts such as Yoga and Jujitsu have taught this for centuries. In the Western World, many people see the goal of studying a martial art as reaching the

coveted black belt. I've practised a few different arts over the years and found that the journey usually takes around three years of classes and practice.

As you climb the grading system and collect a spectrum of belt colours, you realise that the goal you started with is completely unimportant. Getting to black belt is simply a new beginning, like starting again. You have to keep doing the same repetitive practice and strive to improve your technique. Deep down, we all know the key to success with most things in life is following a system; repeatedly doing things and making incremental changes and improvements. Yes that's boring - and setting a goal is more engaging - but, to appropriate the title of a recent psychology study: "Positive fantasies about idealised futures sap energy". Just because you can visualise your goal, doesn't mean you will attain it and the act of visualisation can be counterproductive.

Upgrading your autopilot

Habits are one of the many things your body does to run efficiently. It uses automation to reduce the amount of effort you need to do things. The process of forming a habit is called the habit loop, and it works like this:

When you do something that triggers a reward, your brain starts associating this action (or behaviour) with a certain reward or benefit. Over time, this association between trigger and reward becomes stronger, until eventually, the trigger alone is enough for your brain to start releasing dopamine — a chemical that makes you feel good. Your habit is

reinforced each time you do it so you repeat it whenever you encounter the trigger.

After a while, the reward can become so strong that it leads to an automatic response from your brain when you see or think about whatever is associated with it. This automatic response is what we call a habit. For example, if you're feeling a bit bored and lonely, you might pick up your phone, see little red dots on screen and habitually open up whatever's alerting you. That's a system psychologists helped techies develop because they were using the habit loop to get you addicted to apps and devices.

Habits are your body on autopilot. Your brain doesn't know the difference between a 'good' or a 'bad' habit - it just rewards you for them. It's why it's so difficult to give up habits that harm you such as smoking.

The choices you make each day build the environment you're going to exist in in the future. You need to increase the quality of the things you have control over such as nutrition; movement; rest; stress and sleep. Every single day, you've got control over the building blocks you provide your body with to make this environment with. When you look at it this way, every day is an opportunity to improve your future health.

We all make hundreds of decisions per day around the areas of food, exercise and sleep that affect our health and we make most of them without much thought - if any at all. The human body is incredibly efficient, meaning it minimises waste as much as possible and just like

any business trying to be more productive – your body and brain use automation to increase efficiency.

A recent [Cornell University study](#) found that people estimate that they're making around 15 decisions a day around food when they're actually making over 200. Let's say you're a 40 year old who has been choosing your own food since you were 16 years old. That's at least 1.7 million choices you've made around food, which have helped get your physical being into whatever condition it is right now. In the next 30 days, you're going to make at least 6000 choices around food. Here's the change you need to make: you need to go from mindless, habit-based choices to mindful choices about food with a purpose in mind. Eventually, your autopilot mode will be working for your body not against it. And that's the key to how you'll lose weight. Little improvements in your decisions will lead to new habits forming and these will help you make better choices with any kind of food.

Focus on your system, not your goal

In his book, [Atomic Habits](#), James Clear makes a compelling case for how small changes compound over time into big differences in outcomes, and how consciously building a system of small habits is the best way to get to big results.

If a pilot steers off by a couple of degrees and does not course-correct, a flight of 2500 miles from LA to New York turns into a flight to Washington, DC instead. If you make a habit of setting a little money aside each week, over time that can turn into a significant amount.

Similarly, if a person eats pizza every day, instead of steak and salad, this might compound over a year into weight gain.

Building on psychologist [B.J. Fogg's *Tiny Habits](#), the main thesis in *Atomic Habits* is that big abstract goals like “I want to save up money” or “I want to learn guitar” need to be broken down into much smaller steps that are do-able on a daily basis, and give you rewards on a micro timescale as well as the macro one. It offers a number of helpful hints and methods to do this, the main ones being:

- New habits require a plan and hard-to-miss ‘cues’
- Make the new habits attractive, to help stick to them by ‘bundling’ them with things you like
- Make the new habits as easy to adopt as possible
- Make the new habits immediately rewarding in some way
- Create a framework to keep track of the habits

This is absolutely the best way to think about weight loss but also about improving your health too. Little improvements is my main takeaway from ‘atomic habits’ and you’ll use your system to make improvements to your food choices.

Living Fast Food 30

Before you start

This isn't meant to be a disclaimer, it's important information. This guide is written by somebody with no medical or nutritional qualifications or training. Needless to say, you need to take the right precautions if you have any kind of health conditions. You should check with your doctor before you try to follow it – I certainly did.

Get your survival kit together

When I told Amir, my chef brother I was doing this he told me to buy my own travel cutlery and stick some wet wipes in the glovebox. This, he told me, was an urban foraging adventure and when you go foraging, you need the right equipment. It's some of the best advice he's ever given me. You'll be deconstructing elements of food and undoing the food design that works against your health. Having your own implements or the confidence to use your hands on food will help you get out of soem big old carbohydrate traps designed to get you hooked. So get your kit together - you can thank Amir later.

Focus on the system not the goal

You've got to practise and to practise well, you must embrace repetition. If you find a great option for your body then stick to it. You can make little changes for the sake of novelty; but remember the warrior who keeps repeating and perfecting their technique is the one who gets to black belt and beyond.

Choose the least processed food

All fast food is processed. Adulterating food in some way is processing it. Even heating changes food's structure to make it easier to digest and metabolise. Cooking also kills pathogens so that's a good thing. There are degrees, though, of processing. The cheese used in a lot of burgers is not 100% dairy in the same way that sausages are not 100% meat and spices. Going for an option that gets you closest to whole food is the best option every time. Look for nutrient dense foods and minimally processed green, leafy vegetables.

Avoid the tricks that get you hooked

The system wants you to be addicted. I'm not saying that all businesses make a conscious decision to reel you in, but they need you to become a loyal customer and their sales data is going to tell them what's working. On top of that, deeper analysis into consumer behaviour will tell them exactly what's getting people hooked and the only sensible way for a business to react is to do more of that. Unfortunately for us, a lot of that is about adding sugar and chemicals that don't do much good for our bodies. The tills want you to behave like an addict - never be satiated - always be looking for the next hit. Food designers and developers work hard to make it convenient and attractive. These options won't keep you full for long so you'll be back for more soon.

Dodge the sugar hiding in plain sight

Sugar is prolific, whether it is in the form of a potato, bun, rice or just plain old granulated. Some sugars are plain for all to see - a glazed donut for example - but some are sneakier. The BBQ sauces at burger and sandwich shops or the brown or red rice that you are told is the healthy option. Remember that it's the combination of sweet, salt and fat that will keep you coming back; and food places know that.

Ditch the carriers - wheat

The wheat-based carriers a lot of fast food comes in is all about profit. Wheat-based casings (buns, flat breads, batter etc.) are cheap, add to the perception of value for money, and shape the food into convenient shapes for us to shove into our mouths with minimal mess.

There is the added benefit (to the food business) that these carriers will also start being converted to glucose as soon as that starch mixes with your saliva. Your taste buds - and the rest of your body - will be confused as to what part of the meal is making it feel good.

Good luck with your urban fast food foraging.

The Guide: Navigating the world of fast food

There are so many food outlets available to choose from while on the move that it's not possible to cover them all in a single book. If you're wondering why a certain brand isn't in here, it's because I couldn't cover everything from large chains through to independent outlets. If I've missed a good'un, tweet me @litaloni with new ideas for fast food and quick service places to try.

In producing a practical guide I've split the options into some broad categories, and I've included some sample brands underneath each. These are the brands that I would most encounter on my travels. I've also tried give you a sense of the independents where possible.

There are examples of brands that do exceptionally well in my opinion, and others that do not.

It's important to state that even if a brand scores low in my list, that doesn't mean that they are bad food brands. It simply indicates that if you are trying to lose weight, then those brands are not going to help you. Likewise, a brand scoring highly is not necessarily a commentary on their comparative food quality.

If you're trying to lose weight, don't focus solely on your end goal. You're more likely to miss it that way. Instead, focus on the system: the daily choices you make to get you there.

Burgers



The burger is the poster child for eating with your hands. When you're deep in the burger zone, avoid the carbohydrates - chips, buns, breaded burgers - and boost proteins.

How to order

Wherever you have a bun, ditch it. As with any sandwich, the bread around the outside merely acts as a means to move the filling from the plate to your mouth.

Avoid the typical condiments, because they contain a lot of sugar. Steer clear of the veggie options - if they aren't highly-processed, carbohydrate rich meat substitutes, they tend to be patties made of breaded vegetables.

Shake Shack and many others are now providing lettuce wraps to anyone that orders a bun-less burger, but until everyone catches up - cutlery is your friend in the burger zone.

Shake Shack and many others are now providing lettuce wraps to anyone that orders a bun-less burger, but until everyone catches up - cutlery is your friend in the burger zone. This makes dissecting your burger an awful lot easier and means you won't attract quite as many glares.

The humble burger joint has moved on over the years. There are lots of customisation options now in the big chains, the upstarts like MEATliquor and Honest Burger and small, local outfits alike. The key thing to remember is to avoid the carbohydrates - the chips and the bun - and boost proteins. The cheese slices that most big franchises use are not brilliant options because they are only usually around 60 percentage dairy. Omitting cheese will help you reduce the amount of energy you're putting in while trying to lose weight too.

McDonald's

McDonald's boasts one of the most customisable fast food menus. The in-restaurant touch screen ordering allows you to add extra ingredients and remove some, all the way down to the condiments included. The meat at McDonald's is 100% British and Irish beef, which is minimally processed.

My go-to option is two triple cheeseburgers with just one slice of cheese and gherkin in each burger. Avoid anything breaded (such as a chicken burger or chicken nuggets). Also steer clear of the BBQ sauces and ketchup as both are refined sugar bombs.

Burger King

Burger King prides itself on customisation - "Have it your way" is a recognised slogan of the company and they stand by this, with a reported 221,184 combinations available on their menu. But you can't order a bun-less burger from its automated screens. Burger King also uses British beef in its burgers. Burger King tends to use thicker patties than McDonald's. Go for a Double Whopper.

Five Guys

Five Guys has a deliberately simple menu. When ordering, you really do get to have it your way, and ordering extra patties or removing items isn't a problem. You'll also get a lettuce wrap here instead of a bun. After ordering a base sandwich, all orders then go through a customisation step where you get to add topping items. You can also order sandwiches with no bun and they'll put your order between two lettuce leaves instead. The free nuts are loaded with protein too.

Chicken



By its nature chicken is a good choice because it's generally a lean, high protein option. But fast chicken is usually fried in batter – carbohydrates, which you can easily remove.

How to order

Steer clear of burger options and go for whole pieces of chicken. Also avoid options like popcorn chicken as their size makes it almost impossible to remove the batter. Be careful of additional sides like that are rich in carbohydrates such as corn and beans. Coleslaw is usually fine.

Chicken is a good choice because it's generally a lean, high protein option. But fast chicken is usually fried in batter – carbohydrates. The secret is to get dirty - you've got to use your hands. As you remove the batter, all of the oil and spices will coat your fingers. Embrace the mess and enjoy the flavour. Imagine yourself as a mixture between a ravenous hunter gatherer and an Urban gourmand. Peri-peri shops are a less messy option as the chicken is usually marinated then grilled in spices. Beware of the sauce station you find in one of these places. It's one of the tricks fast food uses to make you have an enjoyable experience and keep coming back but as far as your body is concerned, it's a quick way to put in direct energy that stops you losing weight.

KFC

The classic fried chicken outlet has expanded its menu considerably over the years. The gold option for anyone losing weight, though, lies in the original bucket options. While your order is somewhat customisable in terms of the number of pieces of chicken, there's no way to order chicken without a coating. The batter is an essential part of the cooking process, so needs to be removed after cooking.

Steer clear of the sides, such as beans and fries. Salads are great if you avoid the beans and sweetcorn and definitely give rice boxes a miss.

Nandos

There's bound to be one near you and the options are good from chicken wings to a whole chicken. The less spicy peri-peri sauces do have sugar and carbs in it though so either go super hot or scrap off what you can.

Avoid the burgers, pittas and wraps as you would have to ditch the bread. The Nando's sides are also carbohydrate heavy apart from broccoli and Macho sprouts. Nando's salads tend to have grains in them so, look out for these.

Favorite

Favorite are a common sight on high-streets up and down the country, although not quite as ubiquitous as KFC. The menu is a familiar fried chicken sort but also includes ribs, subs and fish.

Stick to the original fried chicken options of drumsticks. With the ribs, be careful of the sticky BBQ sauce. You can try to remove some of this before eating but bring wet wipes. The Mac n' cheese poppas, mozzarella poppas and chilli cheese poppas are one hundred percent no-nos as this is processed cheese fired in breadcrumbs. Avoid the burgers too as it's much easier to simply opt for the meat only offerings.

Similar advice stands for Morley's, Franzos, Chunky Chicken, Dixy Chicken or your local independent chicken shop.

Rooster Piri Piri

This is just grilled chicken with a peri peri marinade so as long as you avoid the sides, you will be okay. Don't order the wraps and definitely don't even look at the the sweet potato fries. You can get a salad here, which is useful but be mindful of the dressing you pick or forego altogether.

Sushi



Sushi consists of a bed of rice with vegetable or fish toppings, but they use super refined white rice, which is packed with carbs. This is different to sashimi, which is raw fish, which may or may not include rice.

How to order

Go for sashimi if that's an option. This removes the rice. If this isn't an option, look at the soups but be careful as there might be noodles and rice hidden in them. Some soups also include gyozas, which are made from thin wheat wrappers and these are carb heavy. Dumplings have thicker casings, which are also full of carbs. Rice often appears in bento boxes and salads too. Some places offer chicken wings and edamame - but even the latter has a relatively high carb content.

Sushi places tend to be zen palaces of clean lines and promises of health; but they use super refined white rice, which is packed with carbs. That's what sushi is - a little bed of rice with a vegetable or fish toppings. This is different to sashimi, which is raw fish and may or may not include rice.

Itsu

Itsu also has no sashimi option unfortunately. The sushi is pre-prepared and there are no customisation options. Rice bowls and noodle bowls make removal of the carbohydrate element difficult, so avoid these. The chicken at Itsu is marinated, not breaded, but does tend to be covered in drizzles of sugary teriyaki sauce. This is easily removed but not always obvious.

Itsu really wins on the use of compartmentalisation of food. While some dishes are served on a bed of rice, others have a small helping that is easily avoided. The chicken 'low salad is a fantastic option. Be careful of the equally healthy looking salmon superfood salad, which carries a lot of carbohydrates.

Yo! Sushi

Yo! Sushi is one of the few Asian-style outlets that carries sashimi options. If fish is your thing, head straight there for a selection of salmon and tuna sashimi.

Another great menu option is the Japanese fried chicken, which is marinated in soy and sake. It's breaded chicken, but the breading is easily removed to leave tasty chicken strips. There are also Poke bowls, but avoid the sweetcorn.

Wasabi

The menu at Wasabi isn't particularly flexible so there's not much scope for customising your meal. While Wasabi dishes feature rice or noodles almost uniformly, many dishes are served in a compartmentalised fashion so you can easily not eat the rice. There is no sashimi so steer clear of the sushi and the onigiri.

In the Katsu bento boxes, the chicken is breaded, and unlike KFC, you'll find this virtually impossible to remove. All bento boxes come with either noodles or rice. The salmon protein pot is a dynamite option for fish lovers. Another star on the menu is the cup of miso soup, which will give you an umami flavour hit.

Mexican



Mexican fast food tends to contain a lot of carbohydrates. Wraps, taco shells, beans and rice are common features that aren't friendly if you're trying to lose weight.

How to order

Where possible, go for a naked or bowl option. This removes the flour tortilla or taco shell and means you don't need to worry about removing this yourself. If this isn't possible, treat the tortilla as a wrapper and don't eat it. Yes this is wasteful but remember that you are essentially foraging in an urban setting. Also, if possible, try to swap out the rice and ask for extra vegetables or protein. Ask them not to throw in a handful of nachos in the takeaway bag at the end to cut down on wastage.

Mexican fast food tends to contain a lot of carbohydrates. Wraps, taco shells, beans and rice are common features that aren't friendly if you're trying to lose weight. Everything is bulked up with rice or nachos.

Tortilla

Tortilla is perhaps one of the best options if you have a hankering for Mexican food. The chicken in the dishes is uncoated skinless thigh meat, which is lean and won't require any picking apart. There are both naked and salad bowl options - just swap out the rice and ditch the taco shells or tortilla wraps. As you get to choose what goes in these bowls, you can really load up on the items that will keep you fuller for longer.

Barburrito

Barburrito is more common in the North of England, which restricts its applicability across the UK and Ireland. The menu is good for customisation, as you choose your own fillings, and there is an official swap option for rice in the form of a slaw. You can also opt for a burrito bowl, which you can eat on the move whilst not overloading on carbohydrates.

Taco Bell

The menu at Taco Bell is intended to be quick serve, quick eat. Tacos and burritos are the mainstay. There are no options to have any of the fillings as naked or bowl versions so you'll need to chuck some of the things you've ordered.

The easiest option with Taco Bell is to order a taco and a fork and simply scoop the insides out. The combinations are really satisfying. The meat, cheese, avocado and tomato really hits the spot, but you do look a bit strange eating this way. The Chalupa Supreme is a great option. It comes in grilled chicken, black bean or seasoned beef varieties and contains salad, cheese and cream cheese. You can request extra portions of the meat, so you can create something high in protein.

Sandwiches



The sandwich is completely underrated for the boost it gave productivity when it took over lunchtime food in the 80s. It's also a highly overrated food made for convenience and speed.

How to order

Sandwiches are meant to include bread; it's something of a feature.

Removing the bread takes a lot of the essence away from a sandwich, so sandwich shops are always going to be tricky.

Sandwiches are a prolific fast food option across the UK and outlets come in a range of guises from supermarkets to independent stores to national chains.

Subway

This is the largest franchise in the world so chances are, there will be a Subway near you.

The first thing you get asked when ordering a subway is what bread you want. You're in for a tough time when bread features so prominently.

Subway has clearly listened to customers though, and offers the ability to have any 6-inch sub as a salad box instead of a sandwich. This is the option you should choose every time. Like the cheese steak? Have it on a bed of salad. The only thing to be careful of with this option is the potentially sugary sauces that some fillings use like the meatball marinara or chicken teriyaki. Anything tomato-based or with BBQ in the name is a no and also remember that not all mayonnaises are created equal so the stuff in Subway is not comparable to what you can make at home. Also be careful of the processed meats.

Subway wins extra points on the ability to customise your salad, meaning you can choose items that are low in sugar and carbohydrates.

Independents

By independents, I mean your local office-worker hotspot.

These are similar to Subway really in the sense that you can create your own sandwich. Options for food tend to be extremely varied, from sandwiches to pasta, potatoes, fry-ups and more.

They are a good choice because of the range of options, but the quality of ingredients can vary greatly. Look for outlets where hot meal preparation doesn't rely on a microwave.

Pret a Manger

Like its name suggests, all the foods here are ready to eat. Pret occasionally has soups that are not loaded with carbs but they are a rarity. Pret is a nightmare to navigate - but the one thing that saved me at airports was the very boring 'protein pot'. That's two boiled eggs and a couple of spinach leaves.

Cafes



The typical high street has both recognised chains and small independents to contend with. Quality of food and ingredients can vary considerably, so you might need to stick to a few very obvious options.

How to order

The chain brands tend to serve food as a second option and it's generally packaged, bread-heavy sandwiches, toasties and ciabattas. Otherwise it's cakes, cookies, muffins and croissants. The chain cafés have penetrated the breakfast market in a big way, but eating at these venues is generally not advised.

Independent outlets, such as perhaps the classic greasy spoon, actually can offer far more options.

If you're ordering coffee or tea, limit the energy you're adding to it. Milk contains lactose, which is a sugar. Drinks can contain lots of hidden sugar, especially 'healthy' options like oat milk (rather, oat juice which is a highly-processed carbohydrate rich junk food) and even almond milk when it's sweetened.

As with sandwich shops the typical high street has both recognised chains and small independents to contend with. Quality of food and ingredients can vary considerably, so you might need to stick to a few very obvious options.

Independents

Independent cafés come in a wide variety, from little coffee shops through to greasy spoons. It's likely to be in the latter where you'll actually find the most variety of food to eat. In the typical greasy spoon, meals are cooked to order, are highly customisable and can often be taken away. Many carry an all-day breakfast option, which is how you can order eggs, sausages and bacon. Just be aware that sausages and bacon are processed meats, and sausages may contain hidden carbohydrates within the sausage meat. And stay away from the hash browns.

Other independents usually have a range of salads on offer but steer clear of those packed with pasta or rice; as well as the ubiquitous sweetcorn.

Starbucks

Unless you're drinking a green or black tea, or a black coffee, the advice for Starbucks is to steer clear if you're trying to lose weight. Drinks can contain lots of hidden sugar, especially with "healthy options" like almond or soy milk, which are often sweetened. The chocolate covered almonds are also ok. But, other than that, you can't eat in Starbucks if you want to stay in a fat burning state. Don't even try.

Costa Coffee

Costa Coffee carries similar advice as Starbucks. Unless you're drinking an unsweetened, non-milky drink then steer clear. There are no food options available. You can try pulling apart a sandwich, or peeling apart a toastie, but the resulting food you'll get is simply not worth the effort.

Bakeries



Bakeries have changed a lot in the past 20 years. They aren't just bun shops any more, now you'll find a selection of hot foods. But most of them are a total nightmare if you're trying to lose weight.

How to order

Let's be honest - unless they have a salad option, bakeries are not going to be your friend if you want to stay in fat burning mode. Bakeries are carbohydrate refuelling stations with sugar and sprinkles on top. Definitely steer clear.

Bakeries have changed a lot in the past 20 years. Much like sandwich shops, they have diversified. Whereas they used to offer baked goods only, many will now offer a selection of hot foods, sandwiches and savoury snacks.

Greggs

Greggs has really dominated the food-on-the-go space for some time, commanding a large market share and a strong high-street presence. Yes, they even have a clothing range for fanboys and girls.

Despite its popularity, if you're aiming to lose weight, there is nothing for you here. This is where cheap flour and fat are baked into food shaped objects.

There are 24g of carbohydrate in a Gregg's sausage roll; and 30g in the steak bake. The salad options contain rice and pasta as their main ingredients. In an absolute pinch, you could pick up a sandwich and scrape out the filling, but this simply wouldn't be worth the effort. It would be a depressing act of desperation and even the sauces and marinades used in the sandwiches will be full of sugar.

Don't be tempted by the porridge options for breakfast either. It's instant, ready-made porridge that will give you a massive carbohydrate spike, leaving you hungry - and grumpy - an hour later. Even the tomato soup is full of sugar.

Independents

There are many localised bakery chains like Simmons in Hertfordshire; Dickson's in Tyne and Wear and Gerrard's in North Wales, to name just a few. They are places of wonder and beauty, and each will have local specialisms. However, they generally fall into the same camp as Greggs. And yes gluten-free options are carbohydrate filled too. Remember that iced buns, cinnamon buns and donuts are basically sugary dough creations with more sugar on top.

If your options are limited - or if you're on holiday in Wales and your little darlings have their little hearts set on a *teisennau gradell* - do a quick google for a bakery with salads and ask them to make a fresh option for you with no fillers like rice and pasta, and to hold off on the carb heavy or sugary dressing. Olive oil and a light vinegar is a better option.

In all probability, though, there is likely to be very little you can eat from these shops, so best to remove them from consideration and keep walking, screaming children in tow.

Fish & Chips



The chippy is ubiquitous, but you're not eating chips are you? So what can you do in here? Naturally, there's a simple and tactile answer for you.

How to order

You can order fish. Go for the biggest, fattest fish on the menu and then the loin end - the bit near the head - will be fleshy and satisfying. Cod or rock are good options whereas haddock is quite a flat fish so you will get a more meagre portion. At the end of the meal, you want to feel like you've had something substantial as opposed to just picking bits.

The next job is to take off the batter and tuck into the fish that has steam cooked beneath it. This one is going to require a little bit of a brain shift for you. Don't think about being polite or being tidy; as this is going to see you eating like a hawk on prey. You're just going to eat the good bits. You can use cutlery but this way is more fun and tastier as your fingers will be coated in the oil, vinegar and spices from the batter. This is a visceral experience and means the fish will taste like...fish and chips.

The pickled stuff on sale is good too. Eating pickled foods helps us reset our palates from sweet flavours to sour and bitter. There are some carbs in a pickled onion but there is a trade off for a boost for your anaerobic gut health. Tartare sauce is also fine but stay away from any BBQ or tomato sauces; and remember that the mayonnaise may not be optimal quality.

Harry Ramsden's

The first shop opened in 1928 and the chain now includes one of the biggest fish and chip places in the world. Cod or haddock are a better bet for you than the fishcakes, scampi or cod bites. Avoid pretty much anything else apart from the chicken wings if you're not feeling fish (though why go to a fish and chip place then!).

Kebab shops



Kebab shops get a bad rap, being associated more with drunken revellers filling up on the way home. However, when you actually look at the contents of a typical kebab, there's a lot of useful stuff in there.

How to order

Kebabs are highly customisable, and the serving of meat is usually quite generous, so you'll be full after eating. Just remember though that they remain a highly processed product. If the food is really cheap, it's probably been bulked up with flour, rusk or breadcrumbs like some sausages are. This is often the case for schwarma kebab meat, which is the huge hunk of meat that is slowly cooked vertically.

The most common variety in the UK is the shish, which tends to be marinated beef or lamb on a stick. They sometimes come with vegetables between the meat including peppers and onions. This is a good option for you. Just ask for it to be served with a salad instead of bread. You could also go for a kofta kebab, which is usually minced and spiced lamb.

Stick to the core kebab products and avoid all of the extra stuff like chips, pizza, and burgers that Kebab shops now tend to flog.

Careful with sauces

Garlic and chilli types tend to be ok but anything smokey or tomato-based is often sugar-filled. The mayonnaise will often be the cheap stuff that is mainly water, salt, oil and sugar; coats your tongue and detracts from the taste experience.

Stick to the core kebab products and avoid all of the extra stuff like chips, pizza, and burgers that Kebab shops now tend to flog.

German Doner Kebab

German Doner Kebab is an international chain with a large number of stores across the UK and one in Ireland.

In expanding across multiple countries, German Doner Kebab seem to have lost the central aspect of kebab cuisine. The menu has been productised, which adds burger buns, toasted waffle wraps, and for some reason the addition of Doritos to a kebab burger.

Independents

The independent kebab shops present a great opportunity for you to grab something nutritious and filling on the move. Choosing chicken or beef kebabs is preferential over lamb as leaner options. Every independent kebab outlet that I've been to are more than happy to accommodate requests. You can mix and match different meats and choose what salad you'd like to include.

Indian



India is a subcontinent so the variety of food you'll find in this category is huge. The region's known for great street food and stuff you can eat with your hands and on the go.

How to order

Bangladeshi and Pakistani cuisine are bundled together with a generic 'Indian' label when it comes to the western view of their cuisine. Fair enough, it all used to be India. But the distance between the western border of Pakistan and Sylhet - the Bangladeshi city where most 'curry houses' can trace their roots to - is a few hundred miles more than the distance between London and Ankara in Turkey. We all know the local cuisine in England is different to Turkey, right? Thus, there are massive regional variations influenced by all sorts of things from agriculture to religion.

It all reduces down to a few nice simple rules you'll have followed in other sections.

Don't eat sugary sauces

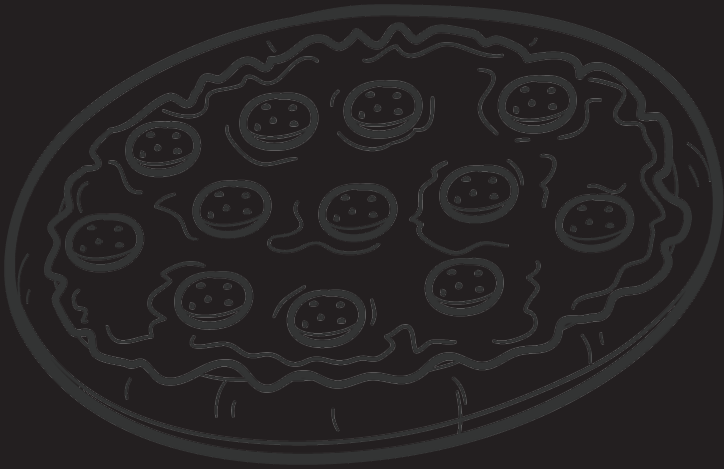
If you're thinking 'curry house' when it comes to Indian, you need to rethink Indian food. I grew up living in an Indian takeaway so I need to be very specific when I say 'curry'. Curry means something in a sauce - a heavily flavoured stew. It's made of the sugariest onions - usually big Spanish onions; at home I'd cook with shallots - you get a lot more onion taste than sugar, so you need less. They boil all the water out, destroy the cell structure then blend the onion into a pulp to use it as a bulking agent. Then they add pureed tomato, which concentrates the fructose you'd find without the water. You need to avoid curry sauce when you're trying to lose weight because it will pack a lot of sugar-adjacent foodstuffs into you without you realising.

Go for dry foods

While you're avoiding avoid these fructose-laden offerings. Instead, opt for "dry" Tandoori dishes whether meat-based or seafoods like prawns. The food is marinated in yoghurt; cooked in spices and not served in a heavy sauce. Make sure that you communicate that you want as little sauce as possible when you put your order in; ask for a salad on the side; and perhaps a slice of lemon. Some restaurants serve Shashlik, which is actually a Russian, kebab-style dish. The peppers it will include do have some carbs but at least you're getting some vegetables with your meat.

Avoid dhal as well as these are made from carbohydrate-heavy legumes. Many of the sides are off the menu as well - naan breads; poppadum; chapatis; pakoras and Bombay potatoes amongst them. If you want to build your meal up a bit around your Tandoori dish, opt for a Sag dish as this will be high in protein including leafy vegs such as spinach or packed with mushrooms. Paneer - cheese - is also a great pick but again ask the restaurant to go light on the sauce. Standard options include Matar Paneer and Paneer Tikka Masala.

Pizza & pasta



Hey, did you skip the introduction by any chance?
If this were a guidebook to a real place, you've just
found yourself the shadiest area of town.

How to order

My advice is not to go there. You're just not going to be able to avoid taking in excess energy when navigating dough-based menus. Even the 'lite' options that pizza chains offer are still pizza with token salad. And that salad is always salad leaves floating in a dressing that is carb and sugar filled. It's their way of saying sorry for taking away half your pizza. And no - just because you opt for a veggie pizza, it's not a green card. It's still vegetables on processed cheese on a sweetened tomato sauce on a plate of dough. Even taking a brief look at Domino's non-bread offering takes me to breaded chicken and wings that are covered in a sugary coating. Steer yourself elsewhere.

Dominos, Pizza Hut and other pizza places

Pizza places are going to take you out of fat burning zone because the format is all about filling you up with lovely profitable carbohydrates that don't cost much but have a decent perceived value to the customer. So you'll be loading up on energy, but it's not the fat, it's the flour that is a problem.

Processed meats like sausage, pepperoni, ground beef sit on top of sauces like Texas BBQ and rich tomato. Customisation revolves around adding more processed cheese to the crust, adding more toppings, adding a side of breaded cheese, breaded chicken, potato wedges or more bread and finally the option to make things larger.

And anyone thinking of putting pineapple on a pizza needs re-educating anyway, not just because you're throwing sugar on top of your food in the form of fructose, but – yuk.

Supermarkets



Supermarkets have been competing with quick service and fast food places for longer than you'd expect. Meal deals are your enemy in this zone - they're carb-filled profit generators.

Supermarkets have long been competing for a share of your stomach and have really driven the ubiquity of the lunchtime sandwich. The first packaged, chilled sandwich hit the high street at Marks & Spencer for £0.43 in 1980 and started a revolution. Every supermarket jumped on the bandwagon and by 1990, the British sandwich industry was worth over a billion pounds.

It marked the start of a new way of working and living that came at a cost. Speed and convenience over quality. You pop in to buy some lunch - usually hungry - opt for the sandwich, and then the crisps next to it, and the chocolate bar and the sugary drink because all of these items are in the meal deal. Boots came up with this concept in 1985 and it delivers instant gratification for workers trying to quickly select a full meal without thinking too much. Now it's a standard way of picking, but not really choosing, your lunch. Your eyes just move from section to section and pick out one item from each.

If a supermarket is your lunch option then avoid the meal deals. They're drawing you into buying what are highly profitable, carbohydrate rich and highly processed foods. The meal deal is great for the company's bottom line and not so good for the customer's body. Removing the bread from a sandwich to eat the filling is something I've only done twice. It's a desperate and miserable way to try and be carb conscious, highly wasteful and not good value for money.

Supermarkets have a secret weapon - they're filled with actual food in the rest of the store. Head to the deli or rotisserie if they have one. This is a top tip from Limbo member, Mary Rodgers, who told me: "Don't dismiss the meats and salads from a deli in a supermarket. Go to the deli counter and just ask for two slices of turkey and two boiled eggs; and you're sorted." If your supermarket doesn't have a deli or rotisserie look for fresh cooked meats or ready to eat

seafood options in the chilled aisle. Having your own knife, fork and wet-wipes really helps here. Don't have them? Go to the kitchen aisle.

Planes, trains, automobiles



Travel is a nightmare when you're trying to lose weight, especially if you're stuck in a metal tube and brought sugary treats every couple of hours while you're bored.

Planes

I travel a vast amount for my work. What I have realised is that from the minute you go through security, you are constantly pushed towards certain types of foods. The array of sandwich shops; the easy to grab “Meal Deal” options at Boots; the pretend pubs, which are mystifyingly always rammed, or even the sushi bar. Carbs and sugar are shoved in your face everywhere you look.

Once you are trapped in your steel tube for however many hours, the primary aim is to fill you full of more sugar and keep you sat down. Every few hours, you get offered a new item of sugar or carbohydrate filled food from the crisps, pop and sandwiches that the ‘No Frills’ airlines offer to the hot meals. Mine always seem to look like an ocean of mashed potato with two little chicken icebergs bobbling in it. There’s often bread and crackers on the side with a teeny cube of cheese or butter. And then a sugary pudding to finish you off.

The truth is that cheap, and therefore, profitable food is carb heavy. You mindlessly eat these meals because you’re bored; because it’s offered and because you’ve paid for it with your ticket. Instead, you need to be conscientious about your food even when flying high in the sky. You can’t really eat plane food. The options are stacked against you. Instead, plan ahead. Entrepreneur Pat Phelan told me in an interview that when he started wearing a blood glucose monitor, he could really see the blood spikes that airplane food caused on his many, many business trips. “Eventually I learned to fill up before a flight on protein-heavy meals so I my energy was regulated and I wasn’t craving snacks or having to eat pathetic airline meals,” he explained.

To make the flight more bearable, take a water bottle and fill it airside and make sure you keep hydrated. Pick an aisle seat so you can get up when nature calls

but also when you need to just stretch and move. And if it's medium or long haul, bring your food with you. The majority of the people I have interviewed travel a lot with work. As one, Julie Garland told me: "Things are opening up but travel is still chaotic and time-consuming". A little bit of planning takes the edge off on the day. There are options at airports if you think ahead of time. Check out the airport website to see what shops there are and what will be open; make a plan and bring with you any extras you can't buy. But even better - If you have time at home - pack yourself a deli box of meats and cheeses; some wet wipes and a brilliant book. And just make sure no-one swipes your far more appetising option when you go to the toilet,

Trains

The food offerings at train stations have got better over the years but if you're not travelling from a mainline station, your options are going to be similar to those as a rural petrol station - muffins; soggy sarnies, a few 'breakfast bars' and an array of crisps. You can go down the route of scientifically dissecting a sandwich on the train but only if you have a seat and even then, be prepared for odd looks from fellow passengers and a lot of mess. The best options - you've guessed it - are either to stock up on protein-rich foods before you leave home and take water with you for the journey. If it's a longer trip; take a protein-rich snack - protein bars; a little selection of cheeses and cold meats or jerky/ biltong. Boiled eggs are a great option but perhaps not in a crowded commuter train.

For those travelling through bigger stations; turn your eyes away from the 'Meal Deals', Greg's and Bagel Factory; and head to Leon where you can plump for a naked burger or a salad box without the dressing. There are plenty of salad options at other outlets - Chopp'd got a hands up from the Limbo members

I have interviewed - but be wary of anything that is drowning in dressing and don't be sheepish about asking for a fresh salad to be made up if you have time. Time is of the essence. Travel is frenetic but if you give yourself more than five minutes before departure, you are going to make conscientious and not panicked decisions. Remember that the easy, go-to options are often packed with sugar, carbs and other less desirables.

If you can take your own food and don't think you're going to be spend the entire journey in someone's armpit; then plan ahead and bring what your body needs with you. And remember that walking past Dunkin' Donuts is a lot easier if you're not grey with hunger and about to embark on a four hour journey with nothing with you to eat.

Automobiles

It's universally agreed amongst Limbo members that the offerings at petrol stations are dismal. This is the food you eat when you are too exhausted from back to back meetings to form a sentence, let alone make a conscious choice about what to eat. Limbo member and IT specialist Stephen Rogan has had the joy of visiting service stations across Ireland. He says: "Being on the road - the additional stresses of travel - has really hit me. There is a serious lack of options. I've just started being very deliberate about looking at the options around me. I've also just shown a bit more restraint." This is hard when the short walk to the counter to pay for petrol means walking past Cadbury's entire offering of sweet treats and some. And it's supposed to be. That's why the crisps and sweets are there - to entice you - that and to push harassed parents travelling with irate toddlers over the edge of sanity. The key is conscientious choices instead of just reaching for something because it's there and you've

eaten it before or because it's in a shiny wrapper and your bleary eyes are drawn to it.

I have written before about how taking a sad looking sandwich apart is not a pleasant option so look at what you can eat without destroying your soul.

Jerky; nuts (Liton jump in here and suggest which ones are best); meats or, says Limbo member Mary Rodgers, even a bag of Babybel cheeses are all protein-rich and low-carb. Or plan head and make yourself a bento-box of snacks including cubes of cheese; deli meats and gherkins (though not the shop bought ones that are high in sugar). Pop in to the garage to grab a black coffee if you're travelling early or at lunchtime but avoid caffeine in the afternoon; and then have a car picnic. Rodgers adds for early birds: "Eat before you get to a breakfast meeting, because what you'll face there is just sugar, sugar and sugar." Maybe not for breakfast, but you can even make yourself a posh prawn sandwich using lettuce leaves instead of bread, but just make sure you can wet wipes handy and it's wrapped well as you don't want seafood dropping between the seats to fester.

If you need to stop for your own sanity not for fuel, pick a park instead of motorway services. You can then have a wander without being bombarded with every shade of sandwich and eat your own food in peace. If you haven't got anything with you and so have to opt for one of the M1's finest establishments, check out my sections on Burgers and Sandwich shops as I've got you covered even when your options look drab and dire.

Fast Food 30 Guide - Scores

I've been to a lot of restaurants, and in pulling together this guide I realised that it would be useful to have some sort of system to enable you to compare different outlets. The scores below are my subjective opinion, based on reviewing the stated nutritional data for each outlet, understanding the food they serve and its production process, and my general experience of ordering and eating at these establishments multiple times.

Each factor has a score out of 5, with 5 being good and 1 being poor. These are then tallied to provide an overall score. The factors themselves have been chosen from my own experience of what I needed from fast food and fast-food outlets.



Speed

Speed of service is pretty damn important when it comes to fast food, it's in the name after all.

You're choosing fast food for that very reason, because you're on the move.



Adaptability

The ability to either customise your order or make changes to your food before eating to remove the bits you don't want to eat. An essential element of losing weight with fast food.



Nutrient Dense

We need nutrients as well as energy. There's no point eating food that doesn't provide both.



Carb Conscious Options

This is a gauge for how many low carb menu options are present in the standard, unadjusted menu.



Feel like you've eaten well

We need to feel satiated after our meal. Needing to eat again an hour later is counterproductive. Food should be enjoyable as well as functional.

Brand/Type	Speed	Adaptability	Nutrients	Carb Conscious	Eaten Well?
Burger King	4	4	4	4	4
Costa Coffee	5	2	3	1	2
Dominos	3	1	1	1	3
Fireaway	3	2	2	1	2
Five Guys	4	5	5	5	5
German Doner Kebab	4	2	4	4	5
Greek outlets	3	5	5	4	5
Greggs	5	1	1	1	1
Harry Ramsden	3	2	2	2	4
Indian restaurants	2	4	4	3	5
Itau	5	3	3	4	3
Kebab shops	3	5	4	4	5
KFC	5	3	2	2	4
Leon	5	1	1	1	1
M&S	5	2	4	4	4
McDonalds	5	3	3	3	3
Nando's	3	4	4	4	4
Pret A Manger	5	1	3	3	3
Roosters Piri Piri	4	3	4	4	4
Shake Shack	4	4	3	3	4
Starbucks	4	1	2	2	2
Subway	4	5	4	5	5
Taco Bell	4	2	3	2	3
Tortilla	4	3	3	3	3
Waitrose	5	2	4	3	4
Wasabi	5	2	4	4	3
Wholefoods	5	2	2	2	2
Yo!	3	1	4	3	3

Burger King

The flame-grilled burgers here are really satisfying, but it's less easy to order them without the bun. You'll need to manually remove it. Go for a Double Whopper with cheese, which you can customise with additional toppings. You have to specifically ask for this though.

4 4 4 4 4 20

Costa Coffee

Eating here is an exercise in sandwich scraping. Suggest that you avoid Costa unless you're ok with moving out of the fat burning zone.

5 2 3 1 2 12

Dominos

The only way to do this is to order as many extra meat toppings as you can and eat it like some kind of fondue in a wheat bowl. Sound weird? Yeah, it is. Don't bother.

3 1 1 1 3 10

Fireaway

A pizza outlet, meaning carb central I'm afraid. The only hack is to order a calzone laden with proteins and eat the insides like a wild animal. They do offer chicken and salads as starters, so you could order a number of these in a pinch.

3 2 2 1 2 11

Five Guys

A freshly grilled burger which you are free to load with as many toppings as you like, making for a really satisfying meal. You can even have the hot dog without the bun. Five Guys offers free peanuts as well, which are high in protein. The chips are tempting but steer clear at all costs. Take your own cutlery or some wipes if you are going to eat one of their burgers without a bun, it can be a bit of a messy affair.

4 5 5 5 5 24

German Doner Kebab

Most of the offerings here are wrapped in cheap carb loaded bread. Eat the meat, delete the carbs. They do offer the Doner Gym Box which is just meat and salad.

4 2 4 4 5 19

Greek outlets

There are loads of options here, lots of grilled meats salads and vegetables. Meals tend to be served with bread and rice. Try to have these removed or just don't eat them. Opt for dips like the feta dips and taramasalata rather than the humus which is loaded with carbs. Fill up on the crudities rather than the bread.

3 5 5 4 5 22

Greggs

This is the house of cheap flour and fat baked into food shaped objects. If you were starving and you had no other options, you could get the ready to go sandwiches and eat their fillings only, but it's far easier to just go somewhere else.

5 1 1 1 1 9

Harry Ramsden

This is a fish and chips restaurant so carbs are the mainstay. Order the biggest piece of fish you can and extract it from its batter shell. Order pickled onions and gherkins, splash on some salt and vinegar, and soak the delicate white fish in in the juices, and you'll be surprised how fish and chippy it tastes despite not having any chips or batter.

3 2 2 2 4 13

Indian restaurants

You'll be able to find all sorts of useful food at Indian outlets as the region is known for doing great street food. Indian cuisine has some healthy options, especially anything cooked in a tandoori oven or grilled. Avoid curry sauces, these are sugary.



Itsu

Very similar to Wasabi, over reliant on white rice. The chicken'low salad is a fantastic option and the compartmentalisation of food means you can easily not eat certain elements.



Kebab shops

The height of customisation - order some filling salad and a range of different meats. Be careful of meat fillers if you can, and avoid sugary sauces.



KFC

Obviously you can't eat the burgers or chips and avoid any breaded products, but if you order pieces from the leg it's fairly easy to peel the skin with the bread coating off.



Leon

The so called pioneers and market leaders of healthy fast food, but most of their foods are carb laden. Over time, Leon have moved their offer closer to their competitors in service stations and high streets, lots of hidden sugars in their sauces, and lots of grains and wheat masquerading as healthy options. Tread carefully. The food is tasty and satisfying, but just make sure that you ask to skip the rice and other carbs.



M&S

M&S have a few protein based options, from the rather basic boiled eggs with three leaves of spinach to a rather indulgent but low carb chicken satay. Again, it's a food shop, go look at the other shelves for better options. Don't be tempted by the high protein biltong they have hanging at the sales points - high protein but drenched in refined sugar.

5 2 4 4 4 19

McDonalds

McDonalds have a bit of an unfair reputation around food quality. The ordering interface is really good for making better choices without feeling like you're being a pain. Watch out for fried food coated in bread crumbs, something really bad happens when you apply high temperatures to carbs in palm oil.

The obvious bunless burgers aside, you can get the grilled chicken wraps and ditch the wrap. With any salads opt out of the balsamic dressing, it's really sugary. Definitely steer clear of the BBQ sauce and ketchup, they are a refined sugar bomb!

5 3 3 3 3 17

Nando's

Order the chicken and be very careful with the sides - broccoli is the one you want. Get a hot peri peri sauce as the milder sauces are full of sugar. Order a side salad to round out your meal.

3 4 4 4 4 18

Pret a Manger

Like the name suggests, all the foods are ready to eat. Boiled egg protein pots and salads are good options, but watch out for sugary salad dressings.

5 1 3 3 3 15

Roosters Piri Piri

This is just grilled chicken with a peri peri marinade, so as long as you avoid the sides you will be okay. Don't order the wraps and definitely don't order the sweet potato fries. You can get a salad here which will help round out your meal.



Shake Shack

Our standard burger advice stands, their burgers are fresh and juicy and when they melt the cheese over them they are very satisfying. Steer clear of the fries and shakes.



Starbucks

Mainly cakes and toasties here, so avoid if you can. One shining star on the menu is the new sous vide eggs option. Don't be tempted to order any carb laden milky coffees. If you like milk in your coffee you are better off ordering an Americano and adding a drop of milk yourself.



Subway

These guys are great, all their 6 inch subs are available as a salad and the salad box is big and you get to choose what you fill it with. You feel full and feel like you've eaten something healthy.



Taco Bell

A quick hack - order the hard taco and use it as a container to eat the filling from. The filling combinations are really satisfying - the meat, cheese, avocado and tomato really hits the spot.



Tortilla

Hold the rice, open up the taco and eat the filling. You might be able to get extra filling by sacrificing the rice. There are both naked and salad bowl options that you can order too.



Waitrose

Waitrose is surprisingly sandwich and sushi heavy so lots of bread and rice. As with most supermarkets, skip the lunch aisle and find better options from the other shelves for lunch.



Wasabi

This another outlet whose menu looks healthy from the outside but actually is laden with white carbs, with super refined white rice a staple in many dishes. It's very easy to eat here and be hungry almost an hour later. Everything is pre-prepped so the only way to eat well is to look out for the protein snacks like the chicken wings and the edamame - but even the latter has a relatively high carb content.



Wholefoods

The range of food here looks and smells really healthy, but again they are in the business of making money. They do this by making you feel like you're being healthy, which is a big part of the brand identity. Go for the deli meats or cheeses, avoid grain ladened salads and pasta dishes.



Yo! Sushi

There are a lot of rice based option here, but the do POKE, don't eat the sweetcorn though, your carb limit will be reached by eating the edamame beans alone.





Epilogue by Rurik Bradbury

Co-Founder & CEO at Limbo

A world that thinks differently about energy and nutrition

This book is a great starting point that hopefully has challenged many dogmas that were fed to you from childhood onwards, and that still loom large today in your thinking about food and nutrition. For me, it's one part of our mission at Limbo, which is to end the obesity crisis.

The need for this is urgent, as the obesity crisis is growing rapidly, globally, in both scale and scope. 2022 was the crossover year when The Lancet estimated that, worldwide, “overweight children would surpass the share who were underweight for the first time.”

While the obesity crisis began in the US, which is — for want of a better word — the “leader” in this area, that country was simply a harbinger of things to come, a canary in the human health coal mine. In these 50 years, the country has rapidly gone from 30% obesity towards 60% in this five decade period, but as the cheap food paradigm spreads globally, so does a rapidly growing obesity crisis.

It takes a major toll in two key ways: First, there is the tremendous human suffering — physical sickness like cardiovascular disease (CVD), diabetes and metabolic syndrome as well as the mental health impact like depression and shame. During the decades where obesity doubled in the US, incidence of Diabetes has grown fourfold from 2% to 8% of the population (CDC), with other spikes in cardiovascular disease, metabolic syndrome, and other connected conditions. The UK is following a similar pattern

Second, there is the enormous financial burden, as already-overstretched healthcare systems have to care for the first generation of humans, ever, to be majority-obese. The “obesity will bankrupt the NHS” headlines are growing from occasional articles to a steady drumbeat, and if nothing changes, by 2030, or sooner, they’ll become true.

What are the solutions to a challenge on such a large scale? A few things are key. First, we need an accelerated shift to a new mindset about food. Second, we need more and better education about food, both starting as kids, and for the general population. Last, we need to drop the most damaging myths and stories about food, and become science-driven, not narrative driven.

Ending scarcity mindset

In a breathtakingly short time, humanity has gone — on average — from scarcity to plenty, in fact, to “hyper-abundance”. In the grand arc of history, this transition is a blip: millions of years of evolution; 12,000 years since the first agriculture; and just 50 years of all-you-can-eat buffets.

Human thinking always has a time lag — we believe what’s passed down to

us from our parents and grandparents. My own grandmother, a Dutch farmgirl, lived through the World War 2 occupation of the Netherlands, when people in Amsterdam and other big cities literally starved to death. She would always tell me: “eat everything on your plate”.

More recently, while 1980s America was booming (in both wealth and body size), its pop stars sang for Band Aid and Live Aid to raise funds for starving families in Ethiopia — a powerful living memory for many people in the UK. But food shortage is thankfully no longer a common issue in Ethiopia. In fact, the population is now 37% obese, according to researchers from a group of the leading universities there. In the region with highest incidence, Dire Dawa, over 61% of people are obese ([PubMed](#)).

While the scarcity mindset lives on, the obesity crisis is a direct result. A new mindset is needed, and quickly. We should draw a more direct line between over-satiety and sickness: CVD, diabetes, metabolic syndrome and so on. The ‘food coma’ slump after lunch is not just a bout of tiredness, it’s an overtaxing of your systems that compounds over time into serious disease.

We should also pressure large chains on portion size, and the types of things that come in large portions. As Fast Food 30 demonstrates, it’s not fast food per se that is bad, but the specific parts of the menu that are high-sugar — either carbs or sweet sugars — that do the damage. French fries, bread, rice bowls — fillers that are cheap for restaurants but invisibly disastrous for customers.

We need to push back on both the “finish everything on your plate” trope and

also, earlier in the supply chain, the “special offers” to double or super-size portions with low-cost and harmful sugars.

Better education, at all levels

Overall, much better general education about food and nutrition is needed. Even the people most directly tasked with leading the public to better health, GPs, receive very little education: often under 20 hours of tuition, in total, to cover all of food and nutrition, across the entire multi-year degree in medical school. This sets up our society to offer “sick-care” rather than healthcare — only kicking in after the damage is done, instead of early intervention to save a person from serious illness in the first place.

While GPs have only a patchy education in nutrition, the general public is much worse off. We need a major push in schools to dramatically increase the number of hours focused on food, nutrition and health.

It has to shift the paradigm beyond the old food pyramid — which originated in Sweden as a way to push low-cost grains and crops — and the ‘standard’ diet, where carbs are the biggest single component of almost every meal. “Starch and meat and two veg” (where one or both of the vegetables are often full of sugar) is a terrible formula to promote.

The education programme should go into depth on the four key macronutrients — protein, fat, carbohydrates and sugar — and how they are instrumental in obesity versus wellbeing. We should teach kids how to read menus and ingredients, and how to distinguish the key components — sugars versus non-sugars — to make better choices.

And we should extend the demonisation of sugar. Instead of the narrow focus on sweets and fizzy drinks (both very bad, to be clear) we should add to our Do Not Eat list the actual drivers of the obesity crisis: bread, potatoes, pasta and rice. Slashing consumption of these is critical to solving the crisis, because carbs are chemically very similar to sugar, and unlimited portions of sugar drives obesity directly.

From myths and stories to science

The third directive to turn the tide against obesity is to move from today's world of myths and stories and rumours to one much more grounded in data. It can't be the traditional data paradigm of food — counting calories — because that metaphor is harmful not helpful. It's a fundamentally flawed concept that measures heat output, instead of food input, and ignores that each body — both in genetics and microbiome — is unique and processes food differently.

The data that is needed is what Limbo and others are focused on: inside the body data on energy regulation, via blood glucose monitoring, that is not just guessing about food, but measuring it. For the first time, we can precisely calibrate what a person should eat based on individualised datasets, rather than generalised guesswork.

This is the way to get out of the hopeless rut that health and nutrition got stuck in, where our dichotomies are meaningless, like “healthy versus unhealthy” food or actively deceptive and harmful like “good carbs versus bad carbs” (there are no good carbs, unless your alternative is literally to eat nothing — but that is rare (see above)).

We'll have to break down some blanket assumptions, such as that all fast food is bad, or that all fruit and veg is good, and transition to a genuinely scientific

mindset, more like chemistry: what are the components of any given food, and how do they drive reactions within the body? Ultimately, how do those reactions impact the constant dynamic process of homeostasis, and compound over time into an expressed phenotype that is obese or thin or somewhere in between.

Only by treating food as the start of a complex set of chain reactions in the body, and measuring those reactions, can we hope to shift our mindset to a new, scientific, and — pardon me — “healthier” understanding of food. And only with a more scientific understanding of food can we hope to solve the obesity crisis, one of the most serious issues facing humanity.

Share your adventure with me on Twitter and Instagram using #fastfood30

To learn more about the system I used while creating this guide, head to:

www.limborevolution.com