

# EARLIER, LIGHTER DINNER

Habit 1



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### What To Do

Eat your last meal of the day by 6 or 7 p.m., at least three hours before bed. For dinner, prefer soups and salads to solid foods, as more water content is easier to digest. Eat more green and non-starchy root vegetables and less grains, legumes, meat, or dairy. After dinner, close your kitchen and don't snack.

### Why You Want To

Dinner should be supplemental—a little extra—not the main event. You will wake up feeling lighter and energized the next day when you keep dinner supplemental. You'll make your body's job easier. You'll have fewer aches and pains as you age, and you won't get fat, tired, and overwhelmed. That's a big payoff for a small meal.

### How To Start

Eat a respectable lunch, which must include protein and fat, even dessert if you want it. Wind back your last meal of the day 15 minutes earlier until you're eating by 6 p.m. Reverse engineer your schedule to make it happen. If you eat dessert, have it immediately following dinner, then brush and floss. Works like a charm.

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*I didn't care about the weight. My body can carry extra weight and it didn't seem like a big deal. My issue was about my integrity. I'd wake up tired and groggy. Now, I wake up clear and light and bright. My body is happier. That is why I eat an earlier, lighter dinner.*

Ginger had wanted to eat an earlier, lighter dinner, but couldn't figure out how it could work. Her kids didn't get home until 6:45 p.m., and the family didn't eat dinner until 7 or 7:30 p.m. She was operating under the outdated belief that if she didn't eat with

her family at the evening meal, she was an inadequate mother.

This belief may sound silly or sane to you. It doesn't matter. What matters is that Ginger's belief created a blockade between how she felt in her body and how she wanted to feel in her body.

I asked Ginger to experiment. From experience in coaching detox clients, I've found that inviting people to run experiments with their diet and habits leads to a perspective of curiosity. What helps me thrive? That's the question.

I asked Ginger to tell me when she would like to eat dinner, if she didn't have family obligations. What would she eat? After feeling into her body and allowing herself the freedom to dream big for herself, Ginger replied:

*I come home from work at 5 p.m. I would do 2 to 15 minutes of meditation or deep breathing, and then prepare a simple dinner for myself.*

Once we knew what *she* wanted, we could work her family obligations around her needs, instead of the other way around. We reversed the order in her evening obligations to fit her long-term goals.

Ginger knew this change was a big deal. The family dinner was an old pattern, instilled by her mother and grandmother. When a pattern carries ancestral weight it feels more like concrete than moldable clay. I invited Ginger to talk to her family about her needs and her desire to eat earlier, by herself, and to enjoy a cup of herbal tea while they ate later. We both knew this would be a monumental shift for her and her family.

Ginger decided to use a time trigger (coming home from work) to inject the updated behavior. She committed to injecting conscious breath work for 2 to 15 minutes immediately when she got home. Being a yoga student, Ginger knew that a few minutes of conscious breath work would shift her brain chemistry from reactive mode

into proactive mode—from stress to ease—even if she started with just two minutes. A calmer, more centered experience would pave the way to making better choices around when and what to eat.

Ginger's new sequence went like this:

Return home from work, set down her bag, wash her face, hands, and feet and go directly to her cushion.

Play an audio instruction for breath work from her smartphone.

Mind clear and body refreshed, prepare a quick, lovely, light meal for herself.

Sit down and eat in silence, enjoying the time to herself.

Feeling nourished and relaxed, finish preparing an evening meal for her family.

Sit, drink tea, and be with her family during the evening meal.

Ginger found that she no longer minded popping out of her chair for family requests which tend to arise during the evening meal, though this used to aggravate her when she was trying to nourish herself at the same time. Did her family mind that she was sipping tea when they were eating?

*No. My kids adapted. Sure, at first it was weird, but we all got used to it after a week. Now I know the consequences of my habits on every aspect of my life. How I feel now is all the impetus I need to maintain my momentum on this new path.*

Such is the power of the earlier, lighter dinner. Over time, she knew she might sway her family's schedule toward an earlier, lighter dinner; however, before inviting them to change, she took

the power of her own body back into her own hands. She changed her behavior and changed her results by changing the order in her evening routine. Below, I'll unpack why this habit worked wonders for Ginger.

## Order Matters

The order of *what* you do *when* is called *krama*. Krama is *the sequence that allows consciousness and energy to flow for optimal health*. Any effective yoga teacher has had weeks of training on sequencing or ordering poses to achieve a desired result—opening the body's subtle channels into flow and strengthening those channels for more capacity, vibrancy, and higher consciousness.

Any computer coder knows how to sequence the right symbols to get the desired results. When you're not getting the results you're after in your life, investigate what you're doing and in what order you're doing it. If you have the right inputs, but the wrong order, you won't get what you're after.

Let's apply this to food. If you eat nutrient-rich food at the wrong time of day, your body can't digest the nutrients. The night before you want to have a great day in body, mind, and spirit—eat an earlier, lighter dinner.

The order in which you do the same things day in and day out determines who you become. If you regularly eat a heavier dinner and try to wake early to exercise or do yoga, your practice won't progress. Your body would rather be inert like a cat after feasting on a mouse. Hit your mat on an empty stomach or after a pint of fresh green juice and your body may be very happy to twist, bend, and go upside down.

Order is crucial. Start with the night *before* the day you want to feel like a million bucks. Mess with the krama of the night before

and you enter the land of inefficiency. When you get the order wrong, it's like rolling a boulder up a mountain—more energy is expended and nothing more is gained. Something is lost.

*Akrama*, or going against the rhythm, reminds me of the fourth circle of *Dante's Inferno*. Men who squandered money (or energy) pushed big boulders around, going nowhere forever. Energy amassed, energy expended, nothing gained. When you eat heavy at night, you generate more work for your body and you misuse your body's resources.

I know this firsthand. The first half of my life I ate a heavier, later dinner. I grew up in suburban Massachusetts. My dad, bless him, commuted 20 miles through traffic to Cambridge five days a week. When he returned home, usually 10 to 11 hours after he'd left, he enjoyed kicking off his shoes and having my sister or me pour him a stiff drink.

For my siblings and me, the wait was excruciating. We were student athletes. We would wait until after 7 p.m. for dinner, our most nutrient-dense meal. By this time, our blood sugar had crashed and we were exhausted. We had passed the stage where our bodies could digest heavy food. Our digestion was shutting down for the night, not gearing up.

A pattern set in motion stays in motion. I inadvertently kept to this late dinner pattern in my mid-20s, and then spent a few years aligning my meal times with what I was learning in Ayurveda and yoga. Late dinners lead to staying up later to digest and getting a lethargic morning start. If your schedule is inefficient for your body, you'll always feel behind. You'll feel like you're perpetually trying to keep up—that there isn't enough time in your day for what you need to do. Let's dive into why.

## Agni and Ama

Ayurveda is brilliant in its obsession with the power of digestion—the fire, the bile, the enzymes that convert food into energy and body. The capacity that governs metabolism, digestion, absorption and assimilation is named *agni*. Turning food into energy and bodily tissue is agni's job.

Agni has its own *krama* within the 24-hour day, warming up by mid-morning, blazing at midday and setting with the sun. Turning heavy food into energy and bodily tissue after the sun goes down is recklessly taxing for your physiology. The outer ecosystem and your inner ecosystem respond to the natural law of “like increases like.” It's easy to forget that the human physiology, including the design of the human digestive tract, evolved over millennia shaped by the natural laws here on Earth.

You are a diurnal creature, unlike your cat or dog. Historically, *homo sapiens* ate during the day, when we could see. Your eyes can see more vibrant color than Fluffy's, whose eyes are designed for low-light and night vision. Fluffy doesn't care if he can see the mouse as he bites off the head. You like to see what you're eating.

Our bile cycle is optimized to digest the most dense nutrients between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m., when sunlight makes our world appear in Technicolor. When you eat a good meal around this time, you have the rest of the day to digest and use the energy from your food. If you eat most of your nutrients or calories later in the day, you make agni's job difficult by eating at a time of day when your digestion is going to sleep. This habit builds up undigested food in your gut, which messes with your system. For me, the consequences were headaches, snot-filled allergies, and a heavier body weight.

The sections of your gut should alternate between dynamic and restful. If your gut is healthy and in rhythm, you truly digest your

food. You feel vibrant and satiated. Your digestive process is smooth and easy. No bloat, no gas, no constipation, no snot the next day.

The word for “undigested” is *ama* in Ayurveda. It is the dirt in the grease of your engine, the gum in the works. Ama is the gunky residue left over from poorly digested food.

Ama leads to energy inefficiency, which leads to disease. When you eat asynchronously, or *akrama*, you disrupt the rhythm of your digestive tract. If the heavy dinner becomes repetitive, the ama moves from the gut into the blood and the joints, rendering the body lethargic and stiff in the morning.

The next day you feel the sludge in your system, the junk in your trunk, and the pessimism in your attitude. The stress leads to inflammation. Add the compound effect to this pattern and you end up with chronic inflammation. No fun. If this is you, know you can



change your reality and wake up with more ease, energy, and flexibility in about a week's time.

The solution is simple. Line up *when* you eat with your human agni cycle. Agni is strongest in the middle of the day. Adjust your schedule to eat your most nutrient-loaded sustaining meal when the sun is bright in the sky.

We used to know this. The midday meal, formerly known as dinner, was shoved to late in the day with the transition from farm to factory. The recent lunch/dinner combo invention is evidently epidemically dangerous for our health.

Back in the day, supper was soup. “Sup” and “sip” both mean to take liquid food. Farmers would have a pot of soup on the stove all day, and in the early evening “sup” the soup at supper. Today the evening meal is showtime as far as the three meals go. Inspect photos of people 50 years ago with their lithe, strong bodies, and you find it's worth a deeper investigation into our newfangled eating cycles in the age of lunch and the absence of supper.

## Make Space to Keep Pace

Your stomach is designed to become full and empty, like a gas tank. But, unlike a gas tank, your stomach expands and contracts. If you don't actively engage the contraction part of the cycle with daily fasting before breakfast, then you're unintentionally creating an endless expansion cycle. Just check the recent statistics on how Americans' waistlines are expanding:

*In 2012, 54.2 percent of Americans had abdominal obesity (defined as an age-adjusted waist circumference of more than 40 inches for men and more than 34.6 for women) compared with 46.4 percent in 1999.<sup>7</sup>*

As a culture, we're stuffed. More than half of us are not just overweight, we're obese. We're expanding and not contracting. We're not allowing the rest phase of the digestive cycle.

It's equivalent to rapid inhales and short exhales. A slow contraction part of the breath cycle creates rest, renewal, and room for the next inhale to be received. If the pulsation is too fast, you hyperventilate.

Digestion works the same way. The long exhale part of the cycle is when the stomach is empty. Allow your body a fast between dinner and breakfast. Thirteen hours is your goal. Dinner by 6 p.m., bed by 9:30, breakfast between 7 and 8 a.m., lunch around noon. No snacking. Deep rest and internal healing requires space in your belly.

Are you a lead belly or a light belly before bed?

Good digestion needs gravity.<sup>8</sup> We're centered on a north-south axis. Lying down with a heavy stomach feels horrible because you are on the wrong axis.

Plus, your breath won't be as deep and easy all night long. With a bloated belly, the inhale is shallow, which triggers the nervous system into a stress response. Shallow breathing puts your body in a stress cycle.<sup>9</sup> If you go to bed on a full belly you'll wake up with less oxygen in your blood and less life-force energy, what the yogis call *prana*, in your cells.

## What if Early Is Impossible?

After a decade of clinical work as an Ayurvedic practitioner, I've heard a plethora of legitimate reasons why it's not possible to eat an earlier, lighter dinner. Most of them sound reasonable, such as:

- \* A big lunch makes me sleepy.
- \* My kids don't get home from sports until 7 p.m.

- \* It takes time to make a nice dinner, so we eat at 8 p.m.
- \* I take or teach a yoga/fitness class after 7 p.m.
- \* My husband and I like to eat after working out—it's the only time of the day we can connect.
- \* Add your reason here: \_\_\_\_\_

Many of us eat later, heavier dinners out of social habit. We were raised to value the evening meal as the quintessential family habit. Yet, as a culture, we now have epidemic issues with mood (anxiety/depression), inadequate sleep, and more than adequate bodyweight.

Our cultural habits violate our bodies' most basic needs. From a biological perspective, the later, heavier dinner is an early, slow, dramatic death sentence. Here is what our old school B.C.E. Ayurvedic text, the *Charaka Samhita*, has to say on the topic of balanced, or *sama*, agni. This is from an analysis of the physiological aspects of agni from the *International Quarterly Journal of Research in Ayurveda*:

*About the importance of Agni, Acharya Charak has mentioned that when the Agni of an individual is sama, then that person would be absolutely healthy and would lead a long, happy, healthy life. But, if the Agni of a person is vitiated, the whole metabolism in his body would be disturbed, resulting in ill health and disease. Hence, Agni is said to be the base (mool) of life.<sup>10</sup>*

If agni is the root of your health, you may want to adjust your schedule to eat dinner at lunch and sup on soup or salad.

## What's for Dinner?

If you've had a good lunch, soup and/or salad is all you need for an evening meal. Soups and salads are quick to prepare and easy to digest due to high water and vegetable content. In salads and soups, the different foods or plants combine before they enter your body, requiring less energy for digestion.

Most dinners at my house take less than 20 minutes to prepare and about 20 minutes to eat. I call dinner "the biggest non-event" in my household. Our soups and salads focus on vegetables from our yard or regional farms. As dinner doesn't take much energy to digest, we are energized after dinner to have fun and burn a few calories before bed to boot.



Rather than preparing and eating an elaborate meal after work that my gut can't digest gracefully, I'd rather spend time playing, taking care of household tasks, or relaxing with my peeps. We stroll together, ride bikes around the hood, or rally for housework or yard work. Light movement after an evening meal feels great, aids digestion, and helps our systems drop into evening chill-out mode.

Our exception to this rule is Sunday dinner. About once per week I prepare an elaborate meal. We dine and relax, enjoying each other's company. We clean up and are done by 5 p.m.

You want dinner to be simple to prepare and simple to digest. Here are some menu items:

- \* Miso soup and green salad with fresh veggies and ginger miso dressing
- \* French onion soup with local artisan bread
- \* Vegetarian chili
- \* Greek salad
- \* Minestrone soup
- \* Green salad with potatoes and green beans
- \* Carrot coconut curry soup and avocado on rice cakes
- \* Tostadas with avocado and sauerkraut (great for travel)
- \* Raw tomato soup
- \* Spicy lentil soup with crème fraîche
- \* Salad Niçoise



- \* Roasted sweet potatoes, brussels sprouts and parmesan
- \* Asian cabbage salad
- \* Arugula with roasted beets and goat cheese
- \* Kimchi and sweet and sour soup

Soup and/or salad—you get the picture.

If you don't like to cook, eat out for lunch. That way you'll be satisfied with a simple green salad or soup for dinner. Learn how to make a few simple soups, and you'll be all set.

See the workbook at [bodythrive.com/free](http://bodythrive.com/free) for simple soup recipes.

## Weekly Meal Planner

When changing habits, we have times of high and low motivation. Perhaps right now you're inspired. You're stoked. You're highly motivated. You want results, and you're ready for action. Take that motivation and make a food plan.

The weekly meal planner is a blank chart to plan what you're eating this week. Use your weekly meal planner to set your *sankalpa*, your intention with food. Planning paves the way for aligned action.

With any habit change, get specific and put it on a timeline or schedule. Schedule an hour to get organized with your food plan. When that hour arrives, start here:

## Nine Steps to Weekly Meal Planning

1. Print four copies of your Weekly Meal Planner. Put blanks in a snazzy folder to store in your kitchen, perhaps with your recipe books. Store used meal planners in your folder to reuse later.
2. Check your cupboards, your fridge, your garden, and anywhere else you store food. Notice what you already have.
3. Take out a few recipe books that seem to jump off your shelf, or open your laptop to your favorite search engine. Google your diet preferences, such as Ayurveda, paleo, raw, vegan, locavore, or whatever describes the foods you want to make. Create a folder just for recipes in your search engine's bookmarks.
4. Get out your calendar. Your daily food prep needs to fit into your preexisting day or you need to adjust your calendar.
5. Fill in your Weekly Meal Planner for this week. Underwhelm yourself. Make it easy to prepare. If you eat out, write in what you intend to order to keep in alignment with the body you want. You can even verbally rehearse your order.
6. Update your calendar. Schedule in your daily food prep times with specific actions. Then schedule when you'll grocery shop or harvest.
7. Write your grocery shopping list.



8. Pin your Meal Planner to your fridge. If your fridge is cluttered, declutter it. Make space to keep pace.
9. Check it daily.

Like any new habit, it's a much bigger deal in the beginning, and effortless once automated.

## Get Specific + Repetitive

If you're changing *when* you are eating, identify a time trigger and a specific habit change. Ginger used the "5 p.m. get home from work" time trigger to start a new habit of meditation. That was enough to set an earlier, lighter dinner in motion.

If you're changing *what* you eat, use the Nine Steps to Weekly Meal Planning. Once Ginger dialed in *when* she ate, she wanted to diversify *what* she ate. Desiring more seasonal and local foods, she took the time to plan, shop, and prep.

Don't get fancy. If you get fancy, you'll fail. Pick only one to two new recipes per week. Eat slight variations on the same thing for lunch and dinner. This saves time, money, and digestive energy. Some of you may think it sounds boring to have the same thing for lunch and dinner. Maybe it is, but that mild repetition frees up the rest of your life to be far more exciting than time in the kitchen or time with indigestion.

You can become a master of streamlining food prep. See the Kitchen Sadhana chapter for ideas.

## Baby Steps

Did you know we lose weight when we eat from smaller plates? Inspect plate sizes from 50 years ago, and you'll find they are one-third smaller. A recent study replaced 12-inch plates with 10-inch plates. People ate 22 percent fewer calories. No willpower required.

Start with where you are and take baby steps to where you want to be. Ginger's transformation occurred when she took what she wanted—to feel better in the morning—and broke it down into small, doable, reasonable actions. She started with two minutes of breath work upon walking in the door from work.

Identify steps that seem doable and fail-proof with all you have going on in your life right now. You don't need to move your meal-time up an hour and a half. You don't need to cancel date night. You don't need to exclusively eat soups, salads, sauerkrauts, ad infinitum. That would only trigger your inner rebel into rebellion. You don't need to set strict rules or regulations for your behavior. Creating unnecessary tension will only undermine your thrive. For those of you who are rebels or rule breakers, you'll only break your own rules anyway. For those who are goody-two-shoes, you'll only disappoint yourself when you can't live up to your rules and trigger your pattern of psychosomatic self-flagellation.

Start with a specific behavior change that seems easy but will be effective enough to notice if it's working over time. At the end of this chapter are tips on where to begin.

Remember, we're more interested in small gains than a perfect picture. Praise your progress. Repeat your anchor statement. Notice the difference and be carried by your nascent momentum. Undesirable habits fall away naturally like dead leaves off autumn trees. Earlier, lighter dinners are not about becoming antisocial or dogmatic. They're about slow, steady changes that support your physiology. Surprisingly, your social schedule will adjust. And you

never know, this just may be the keystone habit that unlocks the door to your body thrive.

## Reverse Engineer Your Success

Often there is too big a gap between how your life is now and how you want it to be. The gap may seem impossible to leap—so don't. Simply build a bridge backward from where you want to be. If other people are involved, you'll find the How to Change Your Habits in Relationships chapter essential to your progress. For now, start with one small change you can make right off the bat, all by yourself, to eat either a little earlier or a little lighter at night. Write that change down right now and put it in your calendar, repetitively. Like the saying goes, *what gets scheduled gets done*.

Over the years, I've worked with dozens of yoga teachers who taught in the evenings. As they studied Ayurveda with me, they began to resent nights away from home. The pattern was dinner after class—after 9 p.m.—which pushed back bedtime, making waking early for meditation and personal practice not fun. They wanted to live the teachings, but changing evening to morning classes wasn't an option in the short term.

Applying the one small change principle, I invited the teachers to *take a light dinner* before class. Many were having a snack then anyway. Adding half an avocado to their snack before class and a cup of broth, miso soup, or herbal tea with milk after class was often all it took for them to make it to breakfast without true hunger on teaching nights. The warm beverage before bed engenders the feeling of nourishment without weighing you down. Another option is to switch from three meals a day to two—around 10 a.m. and 4 p.m.

## Troubleshooting Night Jobs

Many people don't have the gorgeous luxury of sleeping at night and working during the day. Nurses, doctors, cops, security guards, chefs, bartenders, servers, musicians—the list goes on.

The problem is that working nights over time wreaks serious havoc on the universe of you. You need to dial in habits that support your body in these contrary conditions. If you wait tables four nights a week, or work the night shift at the hospital two nights a week, you need to make the most of the nights you have at home. You need a very strong immune system to work nights consistently.

On one hand, you're moving against the massive momentum of circadian rhythm; on the other hand, as a species we are amazingly resilient. To work nights *and* cultivate your immune system, you need rhythms that nourish your body. On your nights off, protect those evenings as if your life force depends on it, because it does. Create quiet evenings at home and wind down early—even if you're in your twenties and want to party like a rock star. Prioritize your bigger picture. Sure, party once every week or two. The other nights, stay home. Go to bed early. Wake up early and plug your attention into your long-term vision.

On nights you work, eat as early as you can in the evening; that will tide you over until bedtime. Eat good whole foods and nourishing fats to stabilize your blood sugar. When you get home in the wee hours, have a cup of herbal tea with licorice root and fennel seeds. Rub some lavender or cedarwood essential oil on your feet and hit the sack. Don't eat late at night or before bed. Streamline your wind-down routine to be quick and efficient (as per the routines in the next chapter).

If you're working nights and needing stimulants for energy, like caffeine or refined sugars, you're digging into visceral adulteration. Your skin will age quickly. You'll feel uncentered, and it

will become more challenging to step into your dreams. Do a short detox to decrease your need for stimulants. Your body has a tough enough job as it is, living in an inverse cycle. Get clean to dig a deep, authentic wellspring of energy.

If you already have poor immunity and poor energy, or feel stuck in an off-cycle in your life, start to plan ahead for what you want your daily routines to look like in the future. Spend some time each week cultivating a plan B or exit strategy to fit your body's desired rest rhythm.

My mom used the phrase "kitchen closed" to signify when we were not allowed to graze through the fridge or cupboards. We ate real meals. After meals, the kitchen was closed. My students embed this mantra to train themselves to stop eating after dinner. The handful of roasted grapes or piece of chocolate puts digestion into overtime. Like the example with the breath, you're not allowing the exhale before the next inhale.

If you eat dessert, make it a light reward for cleaning up, then close your kitchen. If you live with others, close the kitchen to yourself by brushing and flossing immediately after your last meal of the day.

## Are You Stuffed or Content?

As you work and rework this habit, use this assessment to see if you need to take this habit seriously:

- \* You feel great with your weight.
- \* You wake up feeling light and energized.
- \* After dinner you act on the desire to move, to take a walk, to do household tasks, to play outside.
- \* After dinner you don't feel stuffed, you feel content.

- \* You feel a natural fatigue, but not exhaustion, at the end of the day.
- \* When you go to bed, your belly feels empty and light, but you're not hungry.

These signs indicate your dinner is light and early enough. Once you have these earlier, lighter dinners in motion, you've set the stage for the next two habits. You get three habits dialed in for the effort of one.

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## Tips for Eating an Earlier, Lighter Dinner

- \* "Sup" your soup or salad — keep it a one-pot meal.
- \* Use a bowl or 10-inch plate.
- \* Use your Weekly Meal Planner.
- \* Get organized with your grocery shopping.
- \* Be repetitive with lunch and dinner if you don't have much time to make food.
- \* Eat your local and seasonal crops in abundance.
- \* Prep your dinner when you prep your breakfast.
- \* Bake root vegetables in the morning and reheat them in the evening.
- \* Use a slow cooker.
- \* Plan ahead.
- \* Try two minutes of slow, deep breathing before walking into the kitchen.