Guilt-ridden following the annual food-fest that is Christmas? Sluggish after existing on a diet of mince pies washed down with Irish cream liqueur for 12 days? In need of a health kick? We might just have the answer in the form of this energy-boosting, nutrient-packed diet. And, what’s more, you don’t have to give up chocolate!

If you’ve ever sprinkled flax seeds into your porridge, swapped pasta for courgetti or splashed some cash on Spirulina it’s likely you’ve had a brush with the latest food revolution that is Clean Eating.

If the last paragraph makes no sense whatsoever, it’s you’ve probably cast the Clean Eating craze aside as another faddy diet. But, if you are in this camp, never fear – clean eating is not as scary as it sounds and could be the key to improving your health and boosting your energy levels.

For while, at its most extreme, this new food trend might seem slightly eccentric and appear to involve ingredients which are unlikely to grace the shelves of your local Tesco Metro, there are lots of accessible ways to enjoy the health benefits.

Here’s our lowdown on how to eat clean whilst not breaking the bank and without having to waste an entire weekend scouring the country for half price Chia seeds.
Who’s been doing this clean eating, then?

Everyone from Gwyneth Paltrow to Jamie Oliver have been getting on the clean eating or ‘eating clean’ bandwagon over the last few years. You may have seen a new crop of cookbooks emerge on the market from self-styled nutritionists such as Ella Woodward ( Deliciously Ella) and Hemsley & Hemsley. They cornered the market on making food that is free from all sorts of staples such as dairy, gluten, sugar and – in some cases – meat in their bid to cleanse and revitalise their bodies.

This corner of the market has now become so over-populated it has spread to saturation point. And while these pioneers have gone on to make their own TV shows and generally take social media by storm (they never forget to Instagram their dinner) the general public has been lapping up this new craze.

The problem is, going without bread, milk and the occasional Kit Kat Chunky is not the most practical lifestyle choice. Meanwhile there have been cases of people suffering side-effects from clean eating staples such as raw cacao, which – it has been claimed – can cause sleeping problems, mood swings and other symptoms associated with stimulants. There has been a bit of a backlash.

As a result, those who want to enjoy the benefits but keep their diet nutritionally balanced, are seeking more moderate versions of clean eating and that is what we are here to review for you.

So, what is clean eating, exactly?

As the name suggests, clean eating involves consuming food which is as much of a natural state as possible. But the actual interpretation of the diet – as we have seen – is very broad.

For some it might mean going the full Ella Woodward and cutting out gluten, wheat, dairy, sugar and meat. For others it might mean eating meals made from scratch with organic ingredients.

Pollyanna Hale, a weight loss coach to mums who runs TheFitMumFormula, explained clean eating has no official definition. “To most followers,” she said, “it means eating only natural wholefoods that have been minimally processed.

“Some people exclude gluten and dairy, and eat organic [as much] as possible, but it’s not as strict as the Paleo diet, which strictly excludes all dairy and grains as well as beans and legumes.”

It could be as simple as swapping your mid-morning Twix for a boiled egg. Yes… the humble egg does not sound as appealing as a chocolate-covered sweet treat but the benefits are far greater.

The biscuit will give you a brief hit of energy which will subside shortly afterwards. The egg, meanwhile, is rich in vitamins and minerals such as iron and zinc, which can help boost your energy levels and immune system respectively. What’s more it is a source of protein which means you will stay fuller, longer.

And that pretty much sums up the essence of clean eating. It’s about only eating food which benefits your body in some way. Filling up with nutritional food, which is doing something good inside us, rather than gorging on something scrumptious but full of chemicals which either do nothing for our bodies, or can harm them.

This means including a colourful array of fruit and vegetables in all meals, including lots of protein via good quality meat, fish and pulses and filling up with wholegrains. And, the good news is, there is nutritional value in chocolate! Especially if you are into the 80% cocoa variety.

When should I be clean eating?

Clean eating can be incorporated into your diet at any time. If you follow our recipe guide below, you’ll see it’s quite easy to include in day-to-day life and you can also feed ‘clean’ meals to your family too.

In terms of choosing when to start the diet the New Year is the perfect time to begin clean eating – when we are all feeling the burden of the Christmas excesses.

You may be feeling bloated, listless and in need of a pep and some of the benefits

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If it seems overwhelming, introduce meals slowly. Begin with ‘clean’ breakfasts and then, after a few weeks, adapt your lunch and so on.

Don’t beat yourself up if you fall off the wagon. This style of eating is not strict, it won’t matter if you have a slice or two of cake at your friend’s birthday or have a Hula Hoops binge-fest after a bad day at work. You’re only human.

How do I clean eat?

Make sure your meals and snacks contain plenty of fruit, vegetables and protein. Try to cook from scratch if you can and avoid processed foods such ham, bacon, packet sauces, ready meals, ketchup and so on.

If you are not sure it’s processed, check the labels and avoid food where the list of ingredients includes high levels of salt, sugar or components that have been manufactured in a lab. The litmus test is that if you don’t understand what the ingredient is, or have never heard of it, it’s probably processed.

Beware of all those seemingly healthy foods like cereal bars, diet products and ‘low fat’ versions of puddings, crisps and chocolates. They have the same, if not more, bad stuff in them as their higher fat counterparts.

As you’ll notice from our three-day recipe plan, certain ingredients are common throughout and worth buying as store cupboard staples. Examples include coconut oil, sweet potatoes, peanut butter and eggs. You can save money on the more expensive items such as raspberries by purchasing frozen varieties. If you have a peanut allergy, try almond butter or cashew butter as an alternative.
Other tips to help you ‘eat clean’ include making sure you always eat the skins of fruit and vegetables if you can – these contain the most nutritional benefits! So when you eat an apple or a potato, ditch the peeler. And how about making your own pasta sauce from fresh tomatoes, courgettes and onions instead of buying sauce in a jar from the supermarket?

Or try looking for recipes for homemade ‘energy bites’ which are nutritious, filling yet tasty substitutes for chocolate, cakes and cereal bars.

Why is it so beneficial?
According to Pollyanna, the benefits of clean eating are twofold. She said the first is that not eating processed sugars, artificial ingredients and unnecessary additives vastly reduces the strain your body is put under to process and excrete these.

“The body is very capable of dealing with unwanted substances,” Pollyanna explained, “but removing these foods does take the pressure off.”

But that’s not all. “Eating instead more nutrient-dense whole foods that are rich in vitamins, minerals and all the other fats and amino acids we need means that you’re fuelling your body to perform optimally,” she said.

“Eating nutritious foods will give you better skin, digestion, more energy and mental clarity compared to eating junk food.”

And that’s really something to celebrate in the New Year.

This three day clean eating plan has been compiled by Pollyanna to help you get your New Year health kick off to a flying start.

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**Three Day Clean Eating Plan**

**BREAKFAST:**
2 eggs scrambled in 1 tsp coconut oil, with 1 cup chopped peppers and mushrooms

**SNACK:**
A pear with 1 tbsp. peanut butter

**LUNCH:**
100g cooked chicken, 1 tbsp. chopped hazelnuts, and a large green salad dressed in oil and vinegar.

**SNACK:**
hot chocolate made with 200ml reduced fat coconut milk, cocoa powder and 1 tsp honey, plus a bowl of raspberries

**SUPPER:**
100g fresh tuna steak served with roast peppers, tomatoes, onion and courgettes (roast in coconut oil)

**BREAKFAST:**
50g no added sugar, nutty gluten free muesli topped with Greek yoghurt and berries

**SNACK:**
Shake made with 1 tbsp. peanut butter, a medium banana, and 150ml almond milk

**LUNCH:**
Frittata (can be eaten cold), made with 2 eggs, 30g ricotta cheese, onion, spinach and mushrooms.

**SNACK:**
150g Greek yoghurt with berries

**SUPPER:**
Beef Bolognese on courgette spaghetti, sprinkled with 2 tbsp. grated cheese

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**BREAKFAST:**
50g gluten free oats cooked in milk, topped with half a chopped banana and berries

**SNACK:**
Shake made with 200ml full fat milk 100g frozen strawberries and a tsp. honey

**LUNCH:**
Large roast beetroot and feta cheese salad with rocket Snack: 150g cottage cheese with grated apple and cinnamon

**SUPPER:**
100g chicken from a whole cooked deli chicken, with a small sweet potato, cauliflower and broccoli florets roasted in coconut oil