



Simple Food Swaps

Your printable guide to cleaning up the kitchen, one swap at a time

Replace one item at a time, when it runs out. Three swaps that stuck is better than ten you tried and gave up on.

Oils & Fats

Vegetable, canola, corn, soybean, cottonseed oil → olive oil and avocado oil

Olive for everyday cooking and finishing. Avocado for high-heat searing.

Aerosol cooking spray → refillable oil mister

Same job, no propellants or emulsifiers.

Margarine or buttery spread → real butter or ghee

Butter is one ingredient. Spreads are seed oils, colors, and flavors.

Vegetable shortening → butter, lard, or coconut oil

Whichever fits the recipe — all three are real fats.

Low-fat dairy → whole-fat dairy

The fat is what makes dairy satisfying — and the research supports whole-fat for most people.

Dairy

Flavored yogurt → plain whole-milk yogurt + fresh fruit

Flavored yogurts can have as much sugar as ice cream. Plain + fruit is real food.

Flavored coffee creamer → whole milk, cream, or homemade creamer

Store creamers are usually seed oils and "natural flavors" — no real dairy.

Pre-shredded cheese → block cheese, grated yourself

Pre-shredded is coated with cellulose, potato starch, or anti-caking agents.

Processed cheese product → real cheese

If it's labeled "cheese product" or "cheese food," it's mostly not cheese.

Sweetened sour cream / cream cheese products → plain originals

Plain versions should be two ingredients.

Sauces & Condiments

Store mayo → homemade or clean-brand mayo

Most store mayo is built on soybean or canola oil.

Store ketchup → homemade or no-HFCS ketchup

Most ketchup is loaded with high-fructose corn syrup.

Generic mustard → clean-ingredient mustard

Look for short lists. Most mustards are already fine — check first.

Bottled salad dressing → simple homemade vinaigrette

3 parts oil to 1 part vinegar + Dijon + salt. Thirty seconds in a jar.

Boxed broth → homemade or short-ingredient-list brand

Many boxed broths contain yeast extract and "natural flavors."

BBQ sauce → homemade or clean-brand

Most BBQ sauce is corn syrup, food dye, and "smoke flavor."

Worcestershire sauce → clean-brand version

Some brands add corn syrup and caramel color. Look for short lists.

Hot sauce → clean-ingredient hot sauce

Real hot sauce is just peppers, vinegar, and salt.



Simple Food Swaps

continued — bread, snacks, sweeteners, baking, and more

Don't try to do all of these at once. Pick one. When it's a habit, pick another.

Bread & Grains

White sandwich bread → real whole-grain bread

"Whole" must be the first word in the first ingredient. Skip "enriched."

Sugary breakfast cereal → oats, eggs, or yogurt + fruit

Most cereals are sweetened refined grain with vitamins added back in.

Instant oatmeal packets → plain rolled or steel-cut oats

Instant packets are usually sugar, "natural flavors," and additives.

White rice every time → whole grains in rotation

Brown rice, quinoa, farro, barley. Not a strict swap — just variety.

"Enriched wheat" pasta → pasta with a clean ingredient list

Pasta should be one or two ingredients (wheat, sometimes egg).

Snacks

Chips → roasted nuts, popcorn, or roasted chickpeas

Real snacks are one ingredient (or close to it).

Crackers → seed crackers or whole-grain crackers with a short list

Most crackers are refined flour + seed oil + additives.

Granola bars → fruit, nuts, or a hard-boiled egg

Most granola bars are candy bars in a wholesome wrapper.

Pretzels → roasted nuts or seeds

Pretzels are mostly refined flour with little to recommend them.

"Veggie straws" → actual vegetables with hummus or guacamole

Veggie straws are potato flour and food coloring shaped like a vegetable.

Sweeteners & Drinks

Artificial sweeteners → small amounts of real sweetener

Modest amounts of honey, maple, or unrefined sugar over chemical substitutes.

Pancake syrup → real maple syrup

"Pancake syrup" is corn syrup with caramel color and "maple flavor."

Soda → sparkling water with citrus

Sparkling water with lemon, lime, or a splash of fruit juice.

Sweetened iced tea → unsweetened tea, a touch of honey if needed

Most bottled teas are sugar water with tea-flavored extract.

Sweetened cocoa mix → real cocoa + milk + a little sweetener

Mix packets are sugar, dried dairy, and stabilizers — barely cocoa.

Baking & Cooking Staples

Bleached white flour → unbleached or whole-grain flour

Bleaching uses chemical agents that aren't on the label.

Brown sugar with added molasses → unrefined or natural brown sugar

Most "brown sugar" is refined white sugar with molasses sprayed on.

Imitation vanilla → pure vanilla extract

Imitation vanilla is propylene glycol with vanillin flavor compound.

Pre-mixed seasoning packets (taco, ranch, gravy) → real spices and herbs

Packets are MSG, anti-caking agents, "natural flavors," and very little spice.

Boxed cake or brownie mix → simple from-scratch recipes

Box mixes are leavening, modified starches, and "natural flavors."

Iodized table salt → sea salt or kosher salt

Table salt often contains anti-caking agents and dextrose.



How to Read a Label

A quick reference for spotting real food at the grocery store

When you flip a package over, here's what to look for — and what to skip.

The five-second test: Read the ingredient list. If you can't pronounce most of it, if it has more than ten ingredients, or if sugar appears in the first three — put it back. Real food usually has a short, recognizable ingredient list.

Read the ingredient list first

Ignore the front of the package — it's marketing. Flip it over and read what's actually in there. The shorter the list, the better. If you wouldn't cook with it at home, it's probably not real food.

Watch for hidden sugars

Sugar hides under many names: high-fructose corn syrup, cane juice, dextrose, maltose, syrup, agave nectar, malt extract. If a sweetener appears near the top of the list — or several show up — put it back.

Skip these red-flag ingredients

Maltodextrin, modified food starch, gums (xanthan, guar), "natural flavors," artificial colors, and industrial seed oils (canola, soybean, corn, cottonseed) are markers of ultra-processing.

"Whole wheat" isn't always whole

Check that "whole" grain is the first word in the first ingredient. Bread labeled "wheat" or "multigrain" is often refined flour with caramel color. Real whole grain says so up front.

Shop the perimeter

The outer ring of the store — produce, meat, dairy, eggs — is where whole foods live. The center aisles hold most of the ultra-processed products. Spend most of your time around the edges.

The "could I make this at home?" test

A jar of marinara should be tomatoes, herbs, oil, and salt — not a paragraph. If the ingredient list reads like a chemistry textbook, your kitchen could probably make a better version.

"Natural" means nothing

The word "natural" on a label is unregulated. "All-natural," "naturally flavored," and "made with natural ingredients" don't have legal definitions. Read the actual ingredient list instead.

Fewer ingredients, better food

Real food usually has one to five ingredients. The longer the list, the more processing has happened. Use the ingredient count as a quick filter while shopping.

Buy produce in season

Seasonal produce is cheaper, fresher, and more flavorful. Frozen fruits and vegetables (with no added sauces) are picked at peak ripeness and make a great year-round backup.

Don't shop hungry

It's an old tip because it works. A quick snack before you go makes it far easier to walk past the impulse buys and stick to your real-food list.