



# Making Decisions Like Tomorrow Depends on It

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Choices count. You can make decisions today that will give you more energy tomorrow, and the right choices over time greatly improve your odds of a long and healthy life.

A hundred years ago, many people died from preventable infectious diseases because they had no cure. Today, a majority of people die from preventable conditions.

The next time you are with two friends, consider that two of the three of you are likely to die from heart disease or cancer. The problem is, you do not see the threats that your small, daily decisions pose in the moment. You have little urgency to change your diet until all those years of fried food, sugar, and processed meat cause a heart attack at age 60. At that point, reversing disease is possible but more difficult.

No matter how healthy you are today, you can take specific actions to have more energy and live longer. Regardless of your age, you can make better choices in the moment. Small decisions—about how you eat, move, and sleep each day—count more than you think. As I have learned from personal experience, these choices shape your life.

# A Personal Perspective

At age 16, I was playing basketball with friends when I noticed something wrong with my vision. There was a black circle in the middle of my visual field. I assumed it would go away. Instead, it got progressively worse. I finally told my mom, who immediately took me to an eye doctor.

That black spot turned out to be a large tumor on the back of my left eye. The doctor said it might lead to blindness. As if that was not enough, I needed to get a blood test to rule out other medical problems. A few weeks later, my mom and I went back to the doctor's office for the results.

The doctor told us I had a rare genetic disorder called Von Hippel-Lindau (VHL). While VHL typically runs in families, my condition was a new mutation that affects just one in every 4,400,000 people. This mutation essentially shuts off a powerful tumor suppressor gene and leads to rampant cancerous growth throughout the body.

I still vividly recall sitting on one side of a large wooden desk as my doctor tried to explain what it would be like to battle cancer for the rest of my life. It was one of those moments when your stomach sinks and your mind races for an alternate explanation. My doctor then described how I was also likely to develop cancer in my kidneys, adrenal glands, pancreas, brain, and spine.

While the thought of losing my eyesight was tough, these longer-term issues were even more daunting. That conversation with the doctor forced me to wrestle with much larger questions about my life. Would people treat me differently if they knew about my illness? Was there any chance I would get married and have kids? Perhaps most importantly, I wondered if there was any way I could live a long and healthy life.

Doctors tried everything to save my eyesight, from freezing the tumors to cooking them with a laser. But the sight in my eye never returned. Once I got over this loss, I turned my attention to learning everything I could about the other manifestations of this rare disease.

I quickly realized that the more I learned, the more I could do to increase my odds of living longer. As new information emerged, I discovered I could stay ahead of my condition with annual MRIs, CTs, and eye exams. If doctors caught tumors early when they were small, the tumors were less likely to spread and kill me. Learning that was a huge relief. Even if it required some difficult surgeries, there was something I could do to live longer.

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I have had annual exams and scans for 20 years now and currently have small tumors in my kidneys, adrenal glands, pancreas, spine, and brain. Every year, I “watch and wait” to find out if any of these tumors are large enough to require surgery. In most cases, they are not.

Waiting around for active tumors to grow may sound nerve-wracking. It could be, if I dwelled on the genetic condition that is beyond my control. Instead, I use these annual exams to stay focused on what I can do to decrease the odds of my cancers growing and spreading.

As each year goes by, I learn more about how I can eat, move, and sleep to improve my chances of living a long and healthy life. Then I apply what I learn to make better choices. I act as if my life depends on each decision. Because it does.

## Small Choices Change Everything

Making better choices takes work. There is a daily give and take, but it is worth the effort. The vast knowledge we have to prevent cancer, heart disease, and other chronic illnesses is staggering. Every day, I read about new ideas that could help someone I care about live a longer and healthier life.

Over the last decade, I have dedicated a great deal of time to organizing this virtual sea of information in a way that can benefit others. What I look for are simple and proven ideas.

I read a wide range of academic studies and research-based articles—from medical and psychological journals to in-depth books—and try to extract knowledge that can help people make better decisions and live healthier lives.

Let me be clear. I am not a doctor. Nor am I an expert on nutrition, exercise physiology, or sleep disorders. I am just a patient. I also happen to be a researcher and voracious reader who loves to extract valuable findings and share them with friends. In my new book, *Eat Move Sleep*, you will find the most credible and practical ideas I have found so far.

What I learned from all this research influences my countless daily decisions. Every bite of food either increases or decreases my odds of spending a few more years with my wife and two young children. Half an hour of exercise in the morning makes for better interactions all day. Then a sound night of sleep gives me energy to tackle the next day. I am a more active parent, a better spouse, and more engaged in my work when I eat, move, and sleep well.

What seem like small or inconsequential moments accumulate rapidly. When your good daily decisions outweigh your poor ones, you boost your chances of growing old in better health. Life itself is a big game of beating the odds. Take, for example, these four largely preventable diseases: cancer, diabetes, heart disease, and lung disease.

Combined, they kill nearly 9 in 10 people.

Researchers have estimated that 90 percent of us could live to age 90 with some simple lifestyle choices. What's more, we could live free of common diseases that make our final years miserable. Even if you have a family history of heart disease or cancer, most of your fate is in your control.

A recent study suggests you do not "inherit" longevity as much as previously believed. Instead, the sum of your habits determines your life span. How long you live is more about how you live your life and less about how long your parents lived.

I am a living testament to the fact that lousy predispositions can be encoded in your genes. Yet even in this extreme case, my decisions affect the odds of new tumors growing and my existing cancers spreading. The reality is, the majority of your risk in life lies in the choices you make, not in your family tree.

No single act can prevent cancer or guarantee you will live a long life. Anyone who promises you something that absolute is a fraud. What I will share with you are some of the most practical ideas to improve your odds of a longer, healthier, and more fulfilling life.

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# Forget Fad Diets, Forever

If you find yourself confused by the latest diet trends and information, you are not alone. According to one report, three out of every four people claim that today's ever-changing dietary guidelines make it hard to eat healthy. More than half of people surveyed find it easier to figure out their income taxes than to know how to eat right. This could explain why a majority of Americans are trying to lose weight, yet two-thirds are overweight or obese. One problem is that being "on a diet" is a temporary effort that assumes an endpoint. Many popular diets are destined to fail. When you see a book or advertisement claiming you can be healthy by doing just one thing for weeks on end, stop and think about the ramifications.

If your primary goal is weight loss, there are countless fad diets to temporarily shed pounds, yet they do not serve your long-term interests. Some of the most egregious examples are diets that instruct you to eat only cookies (yes, several of these exist) or drink smoothies for several days. Even if you do shed a few pounds in the short term, this works against your overall health.

Even mainstream diets fail if they target a single element at the expense of the whole equation. In the early 1990s, "low fat" was the most popular type of diet. This led food companies to create products with lower overall fat. Bagel shops began to appear on every corner. Low-fat chips and crackers lined grocery store aisles. I was one of many who consumed about anything with low fat

content, in hopes of being healthier. However, this dietary shift ignored the fact that it is relatively easy to reduce total fat content by adding carbohydrates, sugars, and synthetic substitutes. This allowed food companies to replace the flavor from fatty foods with something even sweeter. To a large degree, food producers simply exchanged fats for sugar-based ingredients.

Attention then shifted to low-carb diets. This led people to consume greater amounts of animal products for protein, ignoring the detrimental impact animal fats have on our health. And, while vegetarian diets have been popular for decades, they are less healthy if animal products are replaced by refined carbs and sweet foods.

Even basic calorie counting is insufficient. As one expert put it, “Contrary to nutritional dogma, all calories are not created equal.” It turns out, the belief that you can eat anything in moderation is dead wrong.

The quality of what you eat matters far more than the overall quantity. This is the primary finding from a landmark Harvard study that tracked more than 100,000 people for two decades. The researchers discovered that the types of foods you consume influence your health more than your total caloric intake. Quality of food matters even more than levels of physical activity. As one of the Harvard researchers put it, “The notion that it’s O.K. to eat everything in moderation is just an excuse to eat whatever you want.”

Many popular diets have some helpful elements, but only if they are part of a more holistic approach to eating. Think of all the diets you have tried. Keep the best elements of these diets in mind as you make choices. For your overall approach to eating, find foods with less fat, fewer carbohydrates, and as little added sugar as possible.

Eating well does not need to be difficult or complicated. It is possible for healthy eating to be sustainable and even enjoyable. Set your sights on foods that are good for your near-term energy and long-term health. Making a commitment to eating the right foods every day is a lot easier than jumping from one diet to the next.

Once you start eating better, give it time—a lot of time. People often bounce from diet to diet because they grow impatient. The body takes a long time to react to these dietary changes, usually a year or more, according to experts. Instead of worrying about losing 10 pounds in the next month, focus on better decisions the next time you eat. When you make better choices in the moment, it benefits your overall health and well-being.

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# Make Inactivity Your Enemy

Exercise alone is not enough. Working out three times a week is not enough. Being active throughout the day is what keeps you healthy.

For centuries, our ancestors spent a large portion of their time moving around on foot. From the days of hunting wild animals, to more recent times working on farms, a typical workday used to be spent doing physical labor.

Over the past century, this has changed dramatically.

On average, we now spend more time sitting down (9.3 hours) than sleeping in a given day. The human body is not built for this, and the obesity and diabetes it contributes to is a major public health problem. Watching your diet and exercising 30 minutes a day will not be enough to offset many hours of sitting.

When I was growing up, my days were filled with physical activity. I spent most of my time running around the neighborhood with friends, playing basketball in my driveway, and practicing for other sports. When I look back, it is no wonder I felt so good and had boundless energy. Most of my waking hours were spent in motion.

This is why it was a rude awakening when I started working full time. All of a sudden, the majority of my time was spent sitting. On my best days, I would spend an hour working out. Then I spent about an hour walking around my home and office. Add eight hours of sleep, and that left about 14 hours a day of sitting in a chair, car, or couch. Not exactly the active lifestyle I was used to before signing on to a desk job.

Reducing this chronic inactivity is even more essential than brief periods of vigorous exercise. When scientists from the National Institutes of Health followed 240,000 adults for a decade, they discovered that exercise alone is insufficient. Even seven hours a week of moderate to vigorous physical activity was not enough to keep people alive. Among the most active group studied, who exercised more than seven hours a week, those who spent the most time sitting had a 50 percent greater risk of death from any cause. They also doubled their odds of dying from heart disease. Exercise clearly helps, but it will not offset several hours of sitting. The amount of time you spend seated adds up quickly. Let's do the math. You might sit down for a while to watch the morning news and eat breakfast. Then let's say your commute adds another 30 to 60 minutes sitting in a car, train, or bus. When you arrive at work, you sit 8 to 10 hours in an office chair. At the end of the day, you have another seated commute back home, followed by a "sit down" dinner with family. Then perhaps you watch an hour or two of television before going to bed.

Of course, you do have a few hours of activity tucked inside this otherwise sedentary day. Yet when you look at a typical day, it is easy to see how long periods of time when you are not in motion can add up. The challenge is to examine each of these situations. Figure out how to slowly add a little movement, or at least spend less time sitting each day. There are literally hundreds of moments in a day when you can embed extra activity into your routine.

## Sleep Longer to Get More Done

One less hour of sleep does not equal an extra hour of achievement or enjoyment. The exact opposite occurs. When you lose an hour of sleep, it decreases your wellbeing, productivity, health, and ability to think. Yet people continue to sacrifice sleep before all else.

In some workplaces, it is a badge of honor to “pull an all-nighter” to get work done. Then comes boasting about having only four hours of sleep the night before a meeting to show your colleagues just how hard you are working. I fell into this trap for many years, until I realized just how flawed this logic is from every vantage point.

One of the most influential studies of human performance, conducted by professor K. Anders Ericsson, found that elite performers need 10,000 hours of “deliberate practice” to reach levels of greatness. While this finding sparked a debate about the role of natural talent versus countless

hours of practice, another element was all but missed. If you go back to Ericsson's landmark 1993 study, there was another factor that significantly influenced peak performance: sleep. On average, the best performers slept 8 hours and 36 minutes. The average American, for comparison, gets just 6 hours and 51 minutes of sleep on weeknights.

The person you want to fly your airplane, operate on your body, teach your children, or lead your organization tomorrow is the one who sleeps soundly tonight. Yet in many cases, people in these vital occupations are the ones who think they need the least sleep. And more than 30 percent of workers sleep less than six hours per night.

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This sleep-related productivity loss costs about \$2,000 per person a year and leads to poorer performance and lower work quality. Getting fewer than six hours of sleep a night is also the top risk factor for burnout on the job. If you want to succeed in your job, make sure your work allows you to stay in bed long enough. Professor Ericsson's studies of elite performers—including musicians, athletes, actors, and chess players—also reveal how resting more can maximize achievement.

He found that the top performers in each of these fields typically practice in focused sessions lasting no longer than 90 minutes. The best performers work in bursts. They take frequent breaks to avoid exhaustion and ensure they can recover completely. This allows them to keep going the next day.

Prevent sleeplessness from slowing you down. Working on a task too long can actually decrease your performance. To avoid this, work in bursts, take regular breaks, and make sure you get enough sleep to be productive. When you need an extra hour of energy, add an hour of sleep.

## Putting It All Together

Eat right. Move more. Sleep better. When you do these three things in combination, you will see how the overall benefit is greater than the sum of the parts. Eating right is not enough. Exercise alone is insufficient. Sleeping well, in isolation, is not adequate. When you focus all your energy on just one of these pursuits, it often comes at the expense of another. It is essential to think about all three elements together. Eating the right foods provides energy for your workout and improves the quality of your sleep. In turn, a sound night of sleep makes you more likely to eat right the next day. This is why the real magic lies at the intersection between eating, moving, and sleeping. If you can do all three well, it will improve your daily energy and your odds of living a long, healthy life.

As I mentioned in the introduction, life itself is a big game of odds. You get to chip away at it, one day at a time. Small decisions and behaviors are quite consequential. In particular, if you have known risks or health conditions today, the way you eat, move, and sleep are the only things you can control with each decision. Once you start to improve your odds of living longer and stronger, take one more step. Create a culture of health around you. Rethink everything with this in mind. Leading through example is the single best way to improve the health of the people you love.

Consider how you could fill your home with better foods for yourself and your family. Find a few friends or colleagues who will help you stay active. Create an environment where a sound night's sleep is the norm. Help yourself. Then help the people you love to live like life depends on it. Because it does.

## The Eat, Move, Sleep Equation

Starting your day with a healthy breakfast increases your odds of being active in the hours that follow. This helps you eat well throughout the day. Consuming the right foods and adding activity makes for a much better night's sleep. This sound night of sleep will make it even easier to eat well and move more tomorrow. In contrast, a lousy night of sleep immediately threatens the other

two areas. That bad night of sleep makes you crave a less healthy breakfast and decreases your odds of being active.

In the worst-case scenario, all three elements start to work against you, creating a downward spiral that makes each day progressively worse. This is why the book is structured to help you work on all three elements together.

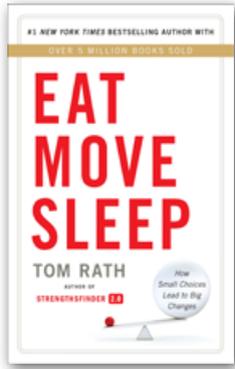
New research shows that tackling multiple elements at the same time increases your odds of success, compared to initiating a new diet or exercise program in isolation.

Eating, moving, and sleeping well are even easier if you work on all three simultaneously. These three ingredients for a good day build on one another. When these elements are working together, they create an upward spiral and progressively better days.

If you eat, move, and sleep well today, you will have more energy tomorrow. You will treat your friends and family better. You will achieve more at work and give more to your community.

**It all starts with making decisions like *tomorrow* depends on it. 📖**

# Info



**BUY THE BOOK** | Get more details or buy a copy of [Eat Move Sleep](#).

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** | Tom Rath has written several international bestsellers, including the #1 New York Times bestseller *How Full Is Your Bucket?* In 2012, his book *StrengthsFinder 2.0* was the top-selling nonfiction book worldwide. Rath's most recent New York Times bestsellers are *Strengths Based Leadership* and *Wellbeing: The Five Essential Elements*. In total, his books have sold more than 5 million copies and have made more than 250 appearances on the Wall Street Journal bestseller list. Rath serves as a senior scientist and advisor to Gallup, where he previously spent 13 years leading the organization's work on employee engagement, strengths, and well-being.

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