

Nutrition in Recovery

Hunger is the H in HALT. Eating regularly is the part that protects recovery.

Guide · The Recovery Files

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The nightly or daily log and your progress charts are in the app.

Why this page leads with the clock

Low blood sugar amplifies emotional reactivity and can mimic a craving closely enough to be mistaken for one. Going hungry is a recognised relapse setup, which is why hunger sits at the front of HALT.

So the goal here is not eating well. It is not going hungry. The Log tab asks whether you ate and when. Nothing on this page scores what was on the plate.

Meal timing that matters

Within 1 Hour of Waking

Eat a protein-rich breakfast within 60 minutes of waking. This stabilizes cortisol, prevents blood sugar crashes, and sets dopamine synthesis in motion for the day.

- Eggs + whole grain toast
- 2-ingredient protein smoothie (banana + Greek yogurt + protein powder)
- Cottage cheese + fruit

Every 3-4 Hours

Never go more than 4-5 hours without eating in early recovery. Hunger is a major HALT trigger and a reliable setup for cravings and relapse.

- Apple + nut butter
- Cheese + whole grain crackers
- Hard-boiled eggs
- Handful of mixed nuts + banana

Pre-Meeting or Triggering Events

Eat a balanced snack 30-60 minutes before known stressors: meetings, family events, difficult conversations. Low blood sugar amplifies emotional reactivity.

- Trail mix + water
- Protein bar (low sugar)
- Yogurt + berries

When Cravings Hit

Before reaching for alcohol or drugs, eat something with protein + fat + fiber. This combination stabilizes blood sugar, reduces reward-seeking behavior, and buys time for the craving to pass.

- Nuts + piece of fruit
- Cheese stick + whole grain crackers
- Peanut butter on banana

Hungry is a relapse risk, not a moral failing

If today got away from you, the answer is to eat something now, not to make up for it later.

Brain healing nutrients

Omega-3 Fatty Acids

Rebuilds damaged brain cell membranes and restores dopamine receptor sensitivity — directly impaired by addiction.

- Salmon, sardines, mackerel
- Walnuts, flaxseed
- Chia seeds

B Vitamins (B1, B6, B12, Folate)

Alcohol depletes B vitamins severely. B1 (thiamine) deficiency causes Wernicke's encephalopathy. All B vitamins are essential for neurotransmitter synthesis.

- Eggs, meat, poultry
- Leafy greens (folate)
- Nutritional yeast
- B-complex supplement

Zinc & Magnesium

Critical for GABA function (calming), dopamine synthesis, and sleep quality. Severely depleted by alcohol and stress. Deficiency worsens anxiety, depression, and cravings.

- Pumpkin seeds, sunflower seeds
- Dark leafy greens
- Legumes, nuts
- Oysters (highest zinc source)

Protein & Amino Acids

Dopamine, serotonin, and GABA are ALL made from amino acids (tyrosine, tryptophan, glutamine). The depleted neurotransmitter system in recovery requires robust protein intake to rebuild.

- Eggs (complete protein)
- Lean meats, fish
- Greek yogurt, cottage cheese
- Legumes + whole grains (plant-based)

Vitamin C & Antioxidants

Addiction creates massive oxidative stress in the brain. Antioxidants neutralize free radicals, reducing neuroinflammation. Vitamin C also supports adrenal recovery.

- Citrus fruits, bell peppers
- Berries (blueberries especially)
- Broccoli, kale
- Dark chocolate (85%+)

Probiotics & Gut Health

The gut-brain axis is deeply disrupted by alcohol and drug use. 90% of serotonin is made in the gut. Healing the microbiome directly improves mood, anxiety, and cravings.

- Yogurt, kefir, kimchi
- Sauerkraut, kombucha
- Miso, tempeh
- Prebiotic fiber: oats, garlic, onion

Swap library

Energy drinkCold brew and water

Candy in the afternoonApple and nut butter

White bread and chipsOats or sweet potato

SodaFermented drink or sparkling water

Skipping a mealAnything with protein, even small

Ideas to reach for, not a scorecard. Nothing here is tied to anything you logged.

Foods worth knowing about

BlueberriesTop Tier

Reduces neuroinflammation; improves memory and dopamine receptor health

Salmon / SardinesTop Tier

Highest omega-3 source; rebuilds brain cell membranes

EggsTop Tier

Choline (acetylcholine precursor), protein, B12, tyrosine, tryptophan — complete brain food

Dark Chocolate (85%+)Top Tier

Flavonoids, magnesium, mild dopamine stimulation without spike-crash cycle

Leafy GreensTop Tier

Folate, magnesium, antioxidants — critical for neurotransmitter synthesis

WalnutsTop Tier

Highest plant-based omega-3; anti-inflammatory; reduces cortisol

Fermented FoodsGut Health

Supports gut microbiome; increases serotonin production

Sweet PotatoGut Health

Complex carb + vitamin B6; steady glucose; precursor to serotonin

OatsBlood Sugar

Slow-release complex carbohydrate; stabilizes blood sugar; contains tryptophan

Lentils / ChickpeasBlood Sugar

High in folate, zinc, B vitamins, and plant protein — all depleted by addiction

Sugar and cravings

Why Do Cravings for Sugar Happen?

Alcohol is essentially liquid sugar — 7 calories per gram, metabolized like glucose. When you remove alcohol, the brain expects a sugar hit. Additionally, alcohol stimulates dopamine release; sugar does too, but less powerfully. Your brain is seeking the dopamine spike through the next available route.

The Dopamine-Sugar Connection

The reward pathway that drove addiction is the same one activated by sugar. In early recovery, with dopamine receptors depleted and sensitivity low, the brain seeks any source of reward stimulation. Sugar temporarily fills this gap. This is neurological, not a character flaw.

Should You Give In to Sugar Cravings?

In early recovery (first 30–90 days), moderate sugar consumption is acceptable and often preferable to relapsing. AA and NA communities have long used sweets at meetings for this reason. However, long-term sugar dependence creates its own problems — blood sugar instability worsens mood, anxiety, and cravings.

The Blood Sugar-Craving Cycle

High-sugar foods spike blood glucose rapidly, triggering insulin. Blood sugar crashes 1–2 hours later, producing irritability, anxiety, fatigue — all relapse triggers. This cycle mimics and amplifies addiction withdrawal. Stable blood sugar is one of the most underrated relapse prevention tools.

What to limit

Refined sugar (candy, soda, sweets)

Blood sugar spikes/crashes → mood instability → cravings

Processed carbohydrates (white bread, chips)

Rapid glucose spike, insulin response, inflammatory

Caffeine over 200mg/day

Worsens anxiety, disrupts sleep, elevates cortisol

Energy drinks

High sugar + high caffeine = blood sugar chaos + anxiety

Trans fats / ultra-processed foods

Neuroinflammation, gut microbiome damage, depression

Skipping meals

Blood sugar crash = HALT trigger, increased relapse risk

Common questions

Can nutrition actually reduce cravings?

Yes — significantly. Stable blood sugar removes one of the most common biological drivers of cravings. Adequate protein provides the amino acid building blocks for dopamine and serotonin. Magnesium deficiency is directly linked to alcohol cravings. Nutrition is not a cure, but it meaningfully reduces the biological fuel for cravings.

How long before I see nutritional benefits?

Some changes (energy, mood stability from blood sugar regulation) can be felt within days. Brain-level repair from omega-3s takes 4–8 weeks of consistent intake. Gut microbiome healing takes 2–3 months. Dopamine receptor restoration takes 6–18 months — but nutrition accelerates this process.

Should I take a multivitamin?

In early recovery, yes. Most people coming out of active addiction are significantly depleted. At minimum: a B-complex, vitamin D (especially if in northern climates), omega-3 supplement, and magnesium. Discuss with your doctor — some people also need thiamine (B1) supplementation, especially after heavy alcohol use.

What about protein shakes?

Protein shakes can be a useful tool in early recovery when appetite is disrupted. Look for low-sugar options with complete amino acid profiles. Whey protein contains high levels of tryptophan (serotonin precursor). However, whole food sources are always preferable when possible.