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**The SKINNY ON FireFIGHTER Diet Trends**

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Travel into any firehouse you might hear discussions about sports, world events, previous calls and [nutrition](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/blog/4-essential-nutrition-tips-for-firefighters/). That’s right—nutrition, specifically dieting and food choices. The more I travel the more I realize today’s firehouse cooks are challenged by having to prepare meals fitting a wide variety of dietary plans. Cooking for a group of hungry first responders is inherently challenging—you have to make food fast, vast and tasty. Now, we need to be cognizant of different eating habits too.

Although this sudden influx of nutritional demand adds stress to the cook, I believe it is a good sign. It shows new focus on [firefighter health and fitness](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/blog/how-first-responders-can-improve-resilience-with-fitness-and-nutrition/). But it also begs the question, how effective are these different diet trends? And are they appropriate for the unique schedules and physical demands of a firefighting career?

Do a Google search about diet plans and you’ll find more than 100 different options: the TLC diet, volumizing, flexitarian, Mayo clinic, Nordic, Jenny Craig—the list goes on and on. But as I travel and speak with firefighters all over the country, the common firefighter diet trends I hear mentioned are keto, paleo, vegetarian, gluten-free and intermittent fasting. I’ve researched each of these diets and have even tried them all. Following is an overview with some pros and cons that can help you understand what each diet is all about and whether any of them is a good fit (no pun intended) for you.

**The Keto Diet**

On a recent trip to a firehouse I found members of the crew making “keto” pizzas. The Keto diet is one of the more popular search topics currently and probably one of the most talked-about in firehouses. The [keto diet](https://health.usnews.com/best-diet/keto-diet) focuses calorie consumption primarily on fat and protein while limiting carbohydrates to under 50 grams per day (for context, a medium banana has 27 grams). The goal of keto is to force your body to use fat for fuel by depriving it of its usual source, glucose. Without glucose available, your body enters a state known as ketosis. The ketogenic diet was originally used as a medical treatment for childhood epilepsy, but it’s become popular for weight loss in recent years.

The ketogenic diet is an extremely low-carbohydrate, high-fat diet. The goal of the diet is to maintain a state of ketosis, which means that by eating fewer carbs, the body's fat-burning system relies mainly on fat instead of sugar for energy. In terms of what you can eat, think high-fat: red meat, bacon, salmon, eggs, butter, cream, cheese, nuts, healthy fats like extra-virgin olive oil and avocados. You can also have low-carbohydrate vegetables like broccoli, celery, cucumber and tomatoes. Since the plan restricts you to lower carbohydrate levels, you’ll have to give up eating many grains, starchy vegetables and fruits high in sugar, any kind of added sugar, chips, and virtually all baked goods.

A lot of people experience quick weight loss when following a keto diet. Some articles boost that it can help with obesity and Type 2 diabetes. More research needs to be performed to confirm those claims. And while some research suggests it can help control blood pressure and cholesterol in the short term, those benefits [don’t seem to last after 12 months](https://www.mdpi.com/2072-6643/9/5/517/htm). If you are extremely overweight or having trouble maintaining healthy blood sugar levels, a keto diet can help kick-start changes. But the diet is stringent and hard to adhere to. And for first responders, the low carbohydrate levels can potentially lead to extreme fatigue during challenging calls such as fires, which could have catastrophic consequences. Before choosing to follow a ketogenic diet, you should consult with your physician and do your research.

*Pros*

* You can eat bacon, meat and fatty foods.
* If followed correctly, can lead to quick weight loss.

*Cons*

* The diet is very restrictive and difficult to follow in the long term.
* The lower level of carbohydrates can lead to extreme fatigue in emergency situations.
* Eating a lot of animal fats can raise cholesterol levels and increase the risk for some diseases.

**The Paleo Diet**

One of the major issues plaguing our modern diet, including the common firehouse diet, is the presence of a lot of processed foods. Cereals, sausage rolls, pies, pastries, bacon and microwave or “ready” meals are convenient, but they lack nutrients and contain high amounts of fat and sugars. The [paleo diet](https://health.usnews.com/best-diet/paleo-diet), however, focuses on eating more primitive food sources, similar to what our paleolithic ancestors ate. The idea behind this diet is that our body has not evolved enough to digest highly processed foods; thus, a diet high in processed foods can lead to obesity and disease.

The paleo mantra is, “Eat what our ancestors ate.” That means lots of lean meat and seafood, fresh fruits, berries and non-starchy vegetables, but no dairy, cereal grains, legumes, processed foods or refined sugar. Basically, if you can hunt or gather it in nature, you can eat it. The diet prioritizes protein and reduces sugar. Since it restricts grain intake, it is also a naturally gluten-free option.

Eating paleo can help dieters restrict calories, which can lead to weight loss. [Studies show](https://www.healthline.com/nutrition/5-studies-on-the-paleo-diet#cholesterol-triglycerides) the diet may lower blood pressure and cholesterol levels, but there hasn’t been enough research to show its effects on heart health overall. If you’re looking to lose weight and don’t mind cooking a lot of your food and prepping meals, it could be a good option.

*Pros*

* Promotes eating clean, unprocessed foods, which can lead to fast weight loss and improved health.
* Promotes eating a wide variety of fruits and vegetables and limiting sugars.

*Cons*

* Can be restrictive and requires meal prep and planning.
* Restricting grain intake can make it more difficult to get fiber and some vitamins and minerals.

**The Vegetarian/Vegan Diet**

Tradition runs deep in the fire service. And meals featuring meat is one of those traditions—especially bacon! But eating vegetarian is becoming surprisingly popular in firehouses. The vegetarian diet excludes meat, poultry, ﬁsh and seafood. [Vegan diets](https://health.usnews.com/best-diet/vegan-diet) go further, excluding all animal products, including dairy and eggs.

While many people choose a [vegetarian diet](https://health.usnews.com/best-diet/vegetarian-diet) for ethical or environmental reasons, some people are motivated by weight loss. But just cutting out animal products doesn’t mean your diet will be healthy or low in calories; candy, pasta and potato chips are all vegetarian. Weight loss on a vegetarian diet comes from shifting to high-quality, unprocessed fruits and vegetables, legumes and whole grains. With the rise of plant-based meats, going vegetarian or vegan is easier than ever. But use caution when eating meat alternatives. They are often highly processed, with high levels of saturated fat, sodium and calories.

Research confirms [those on a plant-based diet have a lower average BMI](https://www.news-medical.net/news/20200615/Vegetarians-have-lower-BMI-and-are-less-extroverted-than-meat-eating-people.aspx) than those who eat animal products, and vegan diets can be [more effective in weight loss](https://www.insider.com/vegan-diets-help-with-weight-loss-blood-sugar-control-study-2022-5) than more traditional diets. A [recent study](https://www.mdpi.com/2072-6643/12/4/970/htm) also confirmed vegans and vegetarians are more likely to stick with the diet over the long run than those on plans such as paleo because they were motivated by ethical and moral beliefs rather than just weight loss. However, a vegan diet can lead to nutrient and/or protein deficiencies if you’re not careful. Changing to a vegan lifestyle can also be difficult to follow if you are surrounded by those not accepting or supporting your decision.

*Pros*

* Eating fruits and vegetables and limiting fatty animal protein can lead to better health and weight management.
* Can eat any plant-based foods.
* Has a positive ethical and environmental impact.

*Cons*

* Cutting out all meat and/or meat products is for some people a radical diet change.
* Can be difficult to follow in a firehouse.
* May result in some [nutrient deficiencies](https://www.naturespath.com/en-us/blog/the-top-5-deficiencies-on-a-plant-based-diet/) like protein.

**The Gluten-Free Diet**

If you have read food labels over the past few years, you’ve probably seen the phrase “gluten-free.” This trend has been gaining in popularity as more people discover they have gluten sensitivity and have tried to limit inflammatory foods. This trend has also found its way into firehouses.

Gluten is a protein naturally occurring in certain foods, but it can also be added to foods during processing for texture. It is commonly found in wheat and several other grains and can sometimes be found in foods you would not expect, such as soy sauce, ice cream and dietary supplements. Eating gluten-free means eating only whole foods that don’t contain gluten, such as fruits, vegetables, meat and eggs, as well as processed foods like gluten-free bread or pasta. Some people think going gluten-free means not eating any carbohydrates, but this isn’t the case. Lots of foods that contain carbs, such as rice, potatoes and beans, don’t contain gluten.

A [gluten-free diet](https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/nutrition-and-healthy-eating/in-depth/gluten-free-diet/art-20048530) is necessary for people with celiac disease, an autoimmune response to gluten that causes the body to attack the small intestine, causing belly pain, nausea, bloating and diarrhea. People with celiac disease cannot tolerate gluten in any form. Another condition that may prompt someone to cut gluten from their diets is a non-celiac gluten sensitivity, sometimes called gluten intolerance. In this case, eating gluten does not result in a definitive negative response, it may just make the individual feel tired or lethargic.

People who adopt a gluten-free diet often lose weight, but it’s usually because they also cut out a lot of processed foods and refined carbohydrates that contain gluten. If you decide to go gluten-free there is a chance you could lack substantial fiber and certain micronutrients. Make sure you monitor your portion sizes, eat a wide variety of fruits and vegetables, and focus on eating lean proteins and healthy fats to get your daily required fiber and nutrients.

*Pros*

* Requires participants to read food labels and understand ingredient lists.
* Encourages eating more fruits and vegetables and removing processed foods.
* Reduces foods high in cholesterol and can lead to a decreased risk of heart disease and better digestive health.

*Cons*

* Can be restrictive and rules out common firehouse foods such as biscuits, bread and pasta.
* It’s easy to accidentally consume gluten.
* [Potential nutritional deficiencies](https://gluten.org/2019/10/17/nutrient-deficiencies/)—some gluten-containing foods are sources of important vitamins and minerals, such as B vitamins, iron, magnesium and fiber.

**Intermittent Fasting**

One of the newest and more popular firefighter diet trends is intermittent fasting. [Research suggests](https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/healthy-weight/diet-reviews/intermittent-fasting/) it can be an effective weight loss method for some people because it naturally leads to calorie reduction. And it’s an easy diet to follow.

[Intermittent fasting](https://health.usnews.com/best-diet/intermittent-fasting) takes various forms. Three of the most popular are 1) alternate-day fasting, 2) 5:2 fasting, which is incorporating two fasting days a week, and 3) time-restricted eating, such as only eating during an 8-hour window every day. On fasting days, dieters may go entirely without eating (just water and non-caloric drinks like black coffee or tea) or limit themselves to around 500 calories. When eating, intermittent fasters can have any food they want, but nutrient-dense meals produce the best results and help maintain energy levels.

If you struggle with diet plans that spell out exactly what you should eat, intermittent fasting might be a good choice for you. All you really need to focus on is timing. However, fasting can lead to a lack of energy, low blood sugar and headaches, which means it can be difficult to do on-shift. If you have low blood pressure or diabetes, intend to get pregnant or currently are, have a history of eating disorders, or are doing intense fitness training, you should consult your doctor before choosing this type of diet.

There is not a lot of long-term research pertaining to intermittent fasting because it is still a relatively new diet trend. In addition to weight loss, some short-term studies suggest it can [reduce diabetes and heart disease risk](https://www.healthline.com/health-news/intermittent-fasting-once-a-week-may-reduce-diabetes-and-heart-disease-risk#:~:text=Intermittent%20Fasting%20Once%20a%20Week%20May%20Reduce%20Diabetes%20and%20Heart%20Disease%20Risk&text=A%20small%20study%20found%20that,cardiovascular%20disease%20and%20diabetes%20risk.). Before deciding if intermittent fasting is for you, do your research to see what timing and type would fit your lifestyle and schedule.

*Pros*

* Easy to follow.
* No calorie counting.
* No macronutrient limitations.
* Unrestricted eating allowed.
* Might [boost longevity](https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2021/09/210929124340.htm).

*Cons*

* Lack of energy, headaches and difficulty concentrating can occur during fasting periods.
* May cause severe hunger and lead to overeating.
* Does not encourage nutritious eating.
* Not advised for people with certain health issues.
* More research needed.

**Evaluating Firefighter Diet Trends**

When it comes to starting a diet plan or changing your eating, it’s hard to know where to start. Sometimes all the options can actually keep you from getting started! The good news: You are on the correct path. Just by reading this brief article, you have some more knowledge and education. And that’s the first step in making positive healthy changes in your diet. Regardless of what program you follow, all of them require you to do some research, read labels and take a moment to understand what you are eating. The next step is to execute and evaluate if it works for you.

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