Healthy habits for new year

In the lead-up to New Year’s Eve, many of us will be thinking about New Year resolutions. If food and eating are likely to feature somewhere on your list, as they often do, here are a few things you might like to consider.

There is no doubt that the single biggest nutrition issue today is overeating. Too many of us, it seems, are taking in far more calories than we need. Thought of in similar terms to our finances, we are spending more than we earn (and the global financial crisis showed what problems that can lead to!).

It is our lifestyle that dictates how much food we can afford to eat. People who exercise a lot can afford to eat more than those who sit down most of the day. If your lifestyle is fairly sedentary, you haven’t got much credit, so to speak.

Given that all of us can only afford to take in a certain amount of calories before we blow the budget, the question is: which are the best foods to ‘spend’ on?

Recent research is showing that, despite evidence that many of us are overeating, we are often not getting enough of certain essential or protective components of foods, because we are not choosing foods wisely.

My own research has shown that people who choose foods that carry good ‘nutritional punch’ not only manage their weight well, but are also able to lower some of their risk factors for heart disease and metabolic conditions like diabetes. These foods include wholegrains, nuts, fruits and vegetables, oily fish, lean meats and low fat dairy products.

We may be prepared to change our diets when health complications develop, but prevention is better than cure. If we all took a more proactive approach and paid more attention to the foods we chose to eat, perhaps we could use our diet to help prevent problems from developing in the first place.
Health research is increasingly suggesting that we would do well to eat more of certain types of foods. For example recent research in people with, or at risk of developing, type 2 diabetes found that including the right kind of fats – polyunsaturated fats found in foods such as walnuts, oily fish, and canola oil – helped improve cholesterol, triglycerides and fasting insulin levels.

Another local nutrition study is underway to further test the effects of various foods – particularly fish, dairy foods and wholegrains – with results so far showing that eating the right kind of foods is central to maintaining a healthy weight. And weight is a very important factor when it comes to disease risk.

Next year, nutrition research at the Illawarra Health and Medical Research Institute will include a new trial investigating the health benefits of different types of vegetables. These types of trials ultimately benefit everyone in the community, because the more that is known about the effects of particular foods, the better advice dieticians are able to offer individuals.

In a nutshell, there are two clear messages emerging. One is that, to lower our risk factors for heart disease and metabolic conditions such as type 2 diabetes, many of us need to eat less and exercise more. The other is that we need to put a little more thought into the foods we choose to eat.

So this New Year’s Eve, perhaps we could make a resolution not just to eat less, but to choose the foods we eat more wisely. After all, we are what we eat.

Professor Linda Tapsell is director of nutrition research at the Illawarra Health and Medical Research Institute, and Director of the Smart Foods Centre at the University of Wollongong.