

Mindful Eating

Paying attention to the moment-to-moment experience of eating can help you improve your diet, manage food cravings, and even lose weight. Here's how to start eating mindfully.



What is mindful eating?

Mindful eating is maintaining an in-the-moment awareness of the food and drink you put into your body. It involves observing how the food makes you feel and the signals your body sends about taste, satisfaction, and fullness. Mindful eating requires you to simply acknowledge and accept rather than judge the feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations you observe. It can extend to the process of buying, preparing, and serving your food as well as consuming it.

For many of us, our busy daily lives often make mealtimes rushed affairs. We find ourselves eating in the car commuting to work, at the desk in front of a computer screen, or parked on the couch watching TV. We eat mindlessly, shoveling food down regardless of whether we're still hungry or not. In fact, we often eat for reasons other than hunger—to satisfy emotional needs, to relieve stress, or cope with unpleasant emotions such as sadness, anxiety, loneliness, or boredom. Mindful eating is the opposite of this kind of unhealthy “mindless” eating.

Mindful eating isn't about being perfect, always eating the right things, or never allowing yourself to eat on-the-go again. And it's not about establishing strict rules for how many calories you can eat or which foods you have to include or avoid in your diet. Rather, it's about focusing all your senses and being present as you shop for, cook, serve, and eat your food.

While mindfulness isn't for everyone, many people find that by eating this way, even for just a few meals a week, you can become more attuned to your body. This can help you to avoid overeating, make it easier to change your dietary habits for the better, and enjoy the improved well-being that comes with a healthier diet.

Benefits of mindful eating

By paying close attention to how you feel as you eat—the texture and tastes of each mouthful, your body's hunger and fullness signals, how different foods affect your energy and mood—you can learn to savor both your food and the experience of eating. Being mindful of the food you eat can promote better digestion, keep you full with less food, and influence wiser choices about what you eat in the future. It can also help you free yourself from unhealthy habits around food and eating.

Eating mindfully can help you to:

- Slow down and take a break from the hustle and bustle of your day, easing stress and [anxiety](#).
- Examine and change your relationship with food—helping you to notice when you turn to food for reasons other than hunger, for example.
- Derive greater pleasure from the food you eat, as you learn to slow down and more fully appreciate your meals and snacks.
- Make healthier choices about what you eat by focusing on how each type of food makes you feel after eating it.
- Improve your digestion by eating slower.
- Feel fuller sooner and by eating less food.
- Make a greater connection to where your food comes from, how it's produced, and the journey it's taken to your plate.
- Eat in a healthier, more balanced way.

How to practice mindful eating

To [practice mindfulness](#), you need to participate in an activity with total awareness. In the case of mindful eating, it's important to eat with all your attention rather than on "automatic pilot" or while you're reading, looking at your phone, watching TV, daydreaming, or planning what you're doing later. When your attention strays, gently bring it back to your food and the experience of cooking, serving, and eating.

Try practicing mindful eating for short, five-minute periods at first and gradually build up from there. And remember: you can begin mindful eating when you're making your shopping list or browsing the menu at a restaurant. Carefully assess each item you add to your list or choose from the menu.

1. **Start by taking a few deep breaths and considering the health value** of each different piece of food. While nutrition experts continually debate exactly which foods are "healthy" and which are not, the best rule of thumb is to eat food that is as close as possible to the way nature made it.
2. **Employ all your senses** while you're shopping, cooking, serving, and eating your food. How do different foods look, smell, and feel as you chop? How do they sound as they're being cooked? How do they taste as you eat?
3. **Be curious and make observations** about yourself, as well as the food you're about to eat. Notice how you're sitting, sit with good posture but remain relaxed. Acknowledge your surroundings but learn to tune them out. Focusing on what's going on around you can distract you from the process of eating and take away from the mindfulness experience.
4. **Tune into your hunger.** How hungry are you? You want to come to the table when you're hungry, but not ravenous after skipping meals. Know what your intentions are in eating this specific meal. Are you eating because you're actually hungry or is it that you're bored, need a distraction, or think it's what you should be doing?
5. **With the food in front of you, take a moment to appreciate it**—and any people you're sharing the meal with—before eating. Pay attention to the textures, shapes, colors and smells of the food. What reactions do you have to the food, and how do the smells make you feel?
6. **Take a bite, and notice how it feels in your mouth.** How would you describe the texture now? Try to identify all the ingredients, all the different flavors. Chew thoroughly and notice how you chew and what that feels like.
7. **Focus on how your experience shifts moment to moment.** Do you feel yourself getting full? Are you satisfied? Take your time, stay present and don't rush the experience.
8. **Put your utensils down between bites.** Take time to consider how you feel—hungry, satiated—before picking up your utensils again. Listen to your stomach, not your plate. Know when you're full and stop eating.

9. **Give gratitude and reflect on where this food came from**, the plants or animals involved, and all the people it took to transport the food and bring it onto your plate. Being more mindful about the origins of our food can help us all make wiser and more sustainable choices.
10. **Continue to eat slowly** as you talk with your dining companions, paying close attention to your body's signals of fullness. If eating alone, try to stay present to the experience of consuming the food.

Fitting mindful eating into your life

For most of us, it's unrealistic to think we can be mindful for every bite or even for every meal we eat. The pressures of work and family sometimes mean you're forced to eat on the go or have only a limited window to eat something or risk going hungry for the rest of the day. But even when you can't adhere to a strict mindful eating practice, you can still avoid eating mindlessly and ignoring your body's signals.

Perhaps you can take a few deep breaths before eating a meal or snack to quietly contemplate what you're about to put into your body. Are you eating in response to hunger signals or are you eating in response to an emotional signal? Maybe you're bored or anxious or lonely?

Similarly, are you eating food that is nutritionally healthy or are you eating food that is emotionally comforting? Even if you have to eat at your desk, for example, can you take a few moments to focus all your attention on your food, rather than multitasking or being distracted by your computer or phone?

Think of mindful eating like exercise: every little bit counts. The more you can do to slow down, focus solely on the process of eating, and listen to your body, the greater satisfaction you'll experience from your food and the greater control you'll have over your [diet and nutrition habits](#).

Mindless eating:

Eating on autopilot or while multitasking (driving, working, reading, watching TV, etc.).

Eating to fill an emotional void (because you're stressed, lonely, sad, or bored, for example).

Eating junk or comfort food.

Eating food as quickly as possible.

Eating until all the food has gone, ignoring your body's signals of fullness.

Mindful eating:

Focusing all your attention on your food and the experience of eating.

Eating only to satisfy physical hunger.

Eating nutritionally healthy meals and snacks.

Eating slowly, savoring every bite.

Listening to your body's signals and eating only until you're full.

Using mindfulness to explore your relationship with food

Whether you're aware of it or not, food dramatically affects your well-being. It can affect the way you feel physically, how you respond emotionally, and how you manage mentally. It can boost your energy and outlook or it can drain your resources and make you feel sluggish, moody, and dispirited.

We all know that we should [eat less sugar](#) and processed foods and more fruit and vegetables. But if simply knowing the “rules” of healthy eating was enough, none of us would be overweight or hooked on junk food. When you eat mindfully and become more attuned to your body, however, you can start to *feel* how different foods affect you physically, mentally, and emotionally. And that can make it much easier to make the switch to healthier food choices. For example, once you realize that the sugary snack you crave when you're tired or depressed actually leaves you feeling even worse, it's easier to manage those cravings and opt for a healthier snack that boosts your energy and mood instead.

Many of us only really pay attention to how food makes us feel when it causes us to be physically ill. The question we should be asking is not, “Does my food make me sick?” but rather, “How *well* does it make me feel?” In other words, how much better do you feel after eating? How much more energy and enthusiasm do you have after a meal or snack?

How does your food make you feel?

To fully explore your relationship with food, it's important to become aware of how different foods make you feel. How do you feel after you swallow the food? How do you feel in five minutes, in an hour, or several hours after eating? How do you feel generally throughout the day?

To start tracking the relationship between what you eat and how it makes you feel, try the following exercise:

Tracking the link between food and feeling

1. Eat in your usual way. Select the foods, amounts, and the times for eating that you normally do, only now add mindfulness to what you are doing.
2. Keep a record of all that you eat, including nibbles and snacks between meals. Don't kid yourself—you won't remember it all unless you write it all down or track it in an app!
3. Pay attention to your feelings—physical and emotional—five minutes after you have eaten; one hour after you have eaten; two or three hours after you've eaten.
4. Notice if there has been a shift or change as the result of eating. Do you feel better or worse than before you ate? Do you feel energized or tired? Alert or sluggish?

Keeping a record on your phone or in a notebook can heighten your awareness of how the meals and snacks you eat affect your mood and well-being.

Experimenting with different food combinations

Once you're able to connect your food choices to your physical and mental well-being, the process of selecting food becomes a matter of listening to your own body. For example, you may find that when you eat carbohydrates you feel heavy and lethargic for hours. Therefore, carb-heavy meals become something you try to avoid.

Of course, different foods affect us all differently, according to factors such as genetics and lifestyle. So it may involve some trial and error to find the foods and combinations of food that work best for you.

The following exercise can help you discover how different food combinations and quantities affect your well-being:

Mixing and matching different foods

- Begin to experiment with your food:
 1. Try eating less food more often, or less food, period.
 2. If you're a meat-eater, spend two or three days excluding meat from your diet.
 3. Or perhaps exclude red meat, but include chicken and fish.
 4. Remove certain foods from your diet: salt, sugar, coffee, or bread, for example, and see how this affects how you feel.
 5. Play with food combinations. Try eating solely starch meals, [protein meals](#), fruit meals, or vegetable meals.
- Keep a record of everything you observe in yourself as you experiment with your eating habits. The question you're trying to answer is: "Which eating patterns add to the quality of my life, and which detract?"
- Continue experimenting with different types, combinations, and amounts of food for two or three weeks, tracking how you feel mentally, physically, and emotionally.

Eating to fill a void vs. eating to improve well-being

While eating undoubtedly affects how you feel, it's also very true that how you feel affects what, when, and how much you eat. Many of us frequently mistake feelings of anxiety, stress, loneliness, or boredom for hunger pangs and use food in an attempt to cope with these feelings. The discomfort you feel reminds you that you want something, *need* something to fill a void in your life. That void could be a better

relationship, a more fulfilling job, or a spiritual need. When you continually try to fill that void with food, though, you inevitably overlook your real hungers.

As you practice mindful eating and your awareness grows, you'll become aware of how often your food consumption has nothing to do with physical hunger, and everything to do with filling an emotional need. As you sit down to eat, ask yourself, "What am I truly hungry for?" Are you craving that "little something to nibble on" because you're genuinely hungry or for another reason?

Filling and saturating yourself with food can help mask what you're really hungry for, but only for a short time. And then the real hunger or need will return.

Need other ways to feed your feelings?

Do you eat to feel better or relieve stress? Do you reach for a pint of ice cream when you're feeling down? Order a pizza if you're bored or lonely? Swing by the drive-through after a tough day at work?

No matter how powerless or out of control you feel around food, there are plenty of things you can do to find more satisfying ways to feed your feelings or fill an emotional void. To learn more, see: [Emotional Eating](#).

Practicing mindful eating forces you to slow down, focus on the present moment, and notice what you're really feeling. And when you repeatedly ask yourself, "How well do I feel after a meal or snack?" you'll begin the process of gaining awareness of your own specific nutritional needs. You'll measure meals and snacks in terms of how they affect your well-being. Your purpose for eating will shift from the intention of feeling full of food, to the intention of feeling full of energy and vitality.

Taking deep breaths before you eat

Breathing deeply can often help to pacify hunger, especially when that hunger really isn't about food. Oxygen fuels the body and breathing deeply can increase your energy and sense of well-being. As you breathe deeply, you also [relax and relieve stress and tension](#), common imitators of false hunger.

[Listen to HelpGuide's deep breathing meditation.](#)

Pausing to enjoy your food

Whenever you feel hungry, and before every meal, take ten slow, deep breaths.

- Reflect on what it is you really want. Ask yourself, "What is it that I'm really hungry for? Is it food? How hungry am I?"

- Continue to ask these questions throughout the meal.

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