

# Healthy Eating: Recognizing Your Hunger Signals

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### Overview

One reason that many of us are not at a healthy weight is because, somewhere along the line, we stopped listening to our body signals that naturally tell us when we're hungry and when we're full.

The signals are still there, but we're out of practice when it comes to paying attention to them.

Learning to recognize those signals again can help you get to a healthy weight and stay there.

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### How can you get back in touch with your hunger signals?

#### Figure out where you are now

First, find out what signals you **are** following. Keep a food journal for 2 weeks, or longer if you need to. Write down not only when and what you eat but also what you were doing and feeling before you started eating. Using the hunger scale below, write down where you were on the scale before you ate and where you were afterwards.

When you look back at your food journal, you may see some eating patterns. For example, you may find that you almost always eat dinner in front of the TV. You may find that you always eat an evening snack, even when you're not hungry. You may find that you often snack when you "feel" like you want to eat (because of boredom, stress, or some other emotion), but you're not truly hungry.

## Use a hunger scale

A hunger scale can help you learn how to tell the difference between true, physical hunger and hunger that's really just in your head. Psychological hunger is a desire to eat that is caused by emotions, like stress, boredom, sadness, or happiness.

When you feel hungry even though you recently ate, check to see if what you're feeling is really a craving brought on by something psychological.

When you start feeling like you want something to eat, rate your hunger on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being starving and 10 being so full you feel sick. A rating of 5 or 6 means you're comfortable-neither too hungry nor too full.

- 1-Starving, weak, dizzy
- 2-Very hungry, cranky, low energy, lots of stomach growling
- 3-Pretty hungry, stomach is growling a little
- 4-Starting to feel a little hungry
- 5-Satisfied, neither hungry nor full
- 6-A little full, pleasantly full
- 7-A little uncomfortable
- 8-Feeling stuffed
- 9-Very uncomfortable, stomach hurts
- 10-So full you feel sick

To eat naturally, the way a baby does, eat when your hunger is at 3 or 4. Don't wait until your hunger gets down to 1 or 2. Getting too hungry can lead to overeating. When you sit down to a scheduled meal, stop and think how hungry you are. If you feel less hungry than usual, make a conscious effort to eat less food than usual. Stop eating when you reach 5 or 6 on the scale.

## When it's time to eat, make healthy choices

For your body to be truly satisfied, your meals need to be balanced. This means that each meal should contain:

- **Carbohydrate.** You get this from grains, fruits, and vegetables.
- **Protein.** You get this from meat, fish, eggs, milk, yogurt, cheese, dry beans, and nuts.
- **Fat.** You get the kinds of fat that help you stay healthy from:
  - Fish, walnuts, and flaxseeds and flaxseed oil. These have omega-3 fatty acids.
  - Olive, canola, and peanut oils; most nuts; avocados; and olives. These have monounsaturated fats.
  - Safflower, corn, sunflower, sesame, soybean, and cottonseed oils. These have polyunsaturated fats.

Your meals should contain tastes that you like and want. This also helps you feel satisfied.

## Learn when to stop eating

Try to stop eating before you get too full. Too full is uncomfortable. It means you ate too much.

Get in touch with what "satisfied," or "pleasantly full," feels like for you.

- Relax before you start eating, and then eat slowly. Remember that it takes some time for your stomach to tell your brain that you're full.
- Stop a quarter of the way through your meal, and check your hunger level. If you're still hungry, keep eating, but stop again at the halfway point. No matter what your parents taught you, you don't **have** to clean your plate.
- Learn what proper portions are. We're used to restaurant portions, but restaurant portions usually contain much more food than we need.

## Don't deny yourself

Lots of people think that healthy eating means never having dessert or french fries or any of the things they love to eat. That's wrong.

Your appetite, which can include a desire for sweets or other less-than-healthy treats, is a strong body signal. And part of keeping your body at that "satisfied" level on the hunger scale is eating tastes that you like and want.

If we try to have an eating plan that cuts out all treats, we probably won't stay with that plan. In fact, we're more likely to go "off the wagon" and eat too much of those foods.

But it's important to recognize when it's your appetite talking instead of your true hunger. Knowing which body signal is talking can help you control what you are eating.

If you're eating healthy and listening to your body signals, a piece of birthday cake or an occasional order of french fries can fit into your healthy eating plan. When the holidays come around, it's okay to eat the traditional foods you love. Just keep listening to your body signals and eat only enough to reach that "satisfied" level.

## A few more tips

- Try not to let your hunger drop to a 1 or 2 on the hunger scale. When you get that hungry, you're likely to eat faster, make poorer food choices, and keep eating past the "satisfied" point.
- On the other hand, let yourself feel **some** hunger between meals. Mild hunger is a good thing. After all, it's a sign that you're not overeating. Teach yourself to appreciate hunger pangs as a natural part of life, as a sign that you're a healthy eater.
- Give cravings 10 minutes. When you suddenly feel the need to eat, tell yourself that you will wait 10 minutes. If it was only a craving, you will have forgotten about it by then, and the urge will be gone. If 10 minutes goes by and you still have the urge to eat, you may be starting to get hungry.
- Don't eat more now because you think you might not have time to eat later. Eat what your body needs now, and worry about later, later.
- Some people find that it's easier to schedule lots of small meals throughout the day. Other people do better with "three square meals." Whichever you choose, try to eat on a regular schedule every day, according to how hungry you usually get. Eating regular meals can help you be more aware of hunger and fullness.
- Does leaving food on your plate drive you nuts? Take smaller servings. Save leftovers for another meal. Share plates with someone. Ask yourself what's more important—a few bites of "wasted" food, or your health?

- When you eat, make your food the main attraction. Sit down at the table with your family. Don't eat in front of the TV. Don't read while you eat. Give your attention to what you are putting in your mouth, how it tastes, and how your body reacts to what and how much you're eating.
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## References

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Current as of October 9, 2017

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