

# Mindful Eating: Back to Basics

People often follow food and diet rules that they believe will help them reach their health goals. These rules might be what to eat, what not to eat, when to eat, or even how to eat. All of this can become overwhelming and cause even the most motivated health-seeker to give up altogether. Recently, a new buzzword has entered the diet world: *mindful eating*. Will this new approach help or hurt people's efforts to eat healthfully?

Mindful eating, also called intuitive eating, happens when people consume food while staying aware of their hunger and without passing judgement on the food or the act of eating. When practicing mindful eating, eaters dismiss external food rules and replace them with internal hunger and satiety cues. Sound nutrition information becomes a guideline for food choices, but food is selected based on hunger levels, nutritional needs, existing illnesses or allergies, and how the food makes the eater feel after a meal.

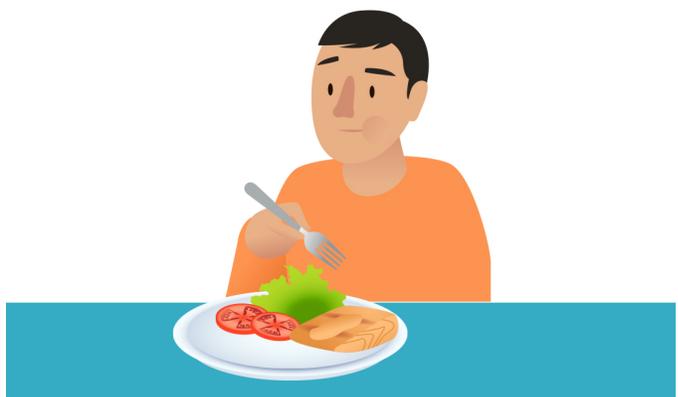
For many dieters who have crafted meals that match an external set of rules, noting the sensations of hunger and satiety may prove difficult. Learning to eat mindfully begins with learning to recognize hunger cues and the feeling of satiety. Hunger can have both physical and psychological sensations. One may feel emptiness or a hollow feeling in the gut, and it may be accompanied by a gurgling or growling sound. Psychologically, one may experience restlessness, the inability to focus, irritability, or fatigue. Hunger can start as a pang and move into a state of ravenousness quickly or slowly, depending on the individual. Satiety should feel more comfortable than hunger. Again, it varies from person to per-

son, but satiety comes with a slight heaviness in the belly, a dulling of the foods' flavors, a return of lost focus or energy, and possibly boredom associated with eating.

Mindful eating does take practice, but it's actually an innate technique. Consider a newborn. When she is hungry, she sends a signal that it is time to eat (crying). When she is satiated, she will turn her head, thrust her tongue, or push away. Over time, we may lose this skill as external factors come into play. The "clean plate club," eating with family at a set time, or various diet rules can all contribute to a loss of this skill. The good news is that people can return to mindful eating and take the focus away from food and external cues. This offers an opportunity to focus on a more joyful and healthy life. When people begin to listen to their bodies, eating becomes a form of self-care. It can restore food to its original function: a source of nourishment.

It's time to get back to basics, ditch the rules, use sound nutrition as a guideline, and truly listen to what our bodies need. It's time for mindful eating.

*By Beth Rosen, MS, RD, CDN*



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