

Health

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Learn how to overcome overeating and enjoy food more

When we're little, we eat when we are hungry and stop when we're comfortable. But, as we get older, we are exposed to messages that make us "unlearn" this balanced way of eating. We see advertising that tells us what we should look like and what we should eat. We learn to use food as a reward for when we do well or when we feel bad. And, we see all the fad diets that tell us we can lose 20 pounds in one week.

One of the keys to healthy eating and living is relearning the message "eat when you're hungry." But this is one of the hardest things that we, as adults, have to learn about healthy eating. How do you learn to stop when you're comfortable if you've lost touch with this over the years?

Experts say there are things you can do to make yourself more likely to stop eating when you are comfortable. They include:

Eat slowly. Research shows that it takes 12 or more minutes for food satisfaction signals to reach the brain of a thin person, but 20 or more minutes for an obese person. Eating slowly ensures that these important messages have time to reach the brain. Try sipping water between bites and chewing food thoroughly before swallowing to slow you down.

Be aware. Don't eat when you are driving, at the computer or talking on the phone. When we're distracted, the food and calories that we eat tend not to register well in our brains. One suggestion is to sit quietly for a few minutes before you eat to get centered. This will help you more easily give your food your full attention and to notice when you have had enough. Also create a calm, clear environment before you eat: Clear your table of paperwork, toys and "things to do later"; turn off the TV, consider putting on some quiet music or eat with no background noise; and make sure that you don't come to the table with negative emotions. If the day was stressful, take a few minutes to relax before eating.

Make the first bites count. Maximum food enjoyment comes in the initial bites. After a few bites, taste buds start to lose their sensitivity to the chemicals in the food that make it taste good. Satisfy your taste buds by really thinking about those first few bites, and enjoying them, to help you stop eating when you're physically comfortable.

Keep up appearances. Use a smaller plate and pay attention to the presentation of a meal to increase your awareness of the food in front of you. This will help you stop eating when you're comfortable. Your brain looks at the plate and will decide if the portion is adequate. When a smaller plate looks full, the brain says "I have enough." And don't just put the food on the plate; try making it look interesting and colorful. For example, select colorful vegetables to add color to the plate and a colorful, crunchy salad. A plate full of white or bland colors is not satisfying to the eyes or taste buds.

Choose satisfying foods. Steer away from foods that give you a lot of calories for very little volume, such as milk shakes, cheese and chocolate. The higher the fiber, protein and water content of a food or meal, the more likely it is to be satisfying in your stomach without going overboard on calories.

Experiments have found that there are three factors that help make a meal more satisfying: the weight of the food, the amount of protein and the amount of fiber. An interesting study done in Australia in 1995 found that top-scoring "satisfying" foods included whole-wheat bread, cheese, eggs, brown pasta, popcorn, all-bran cereal, grapes, oatmeal, baked beans, apples, some fish and oranges. All these foods are high in fiber, water or protein. Foods that were not as satisfying - which make them easier to eat too much of - included food with large amounts of fat, sugar and refined carbohydrates, like potato chips, candy bars and white bread.