

# Think before you eat

Minding your meals may help you eat smarter; stop when you're full.

by Karen Giles-Smith



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ave you ever eaten food just because it was there? Maybe a big piece of leftover pie went down the hatch before you realized what happened. Some time afterward, you may have felt full, but not fulfilled.

There's more to satisfying the stomach than calories. That's what makes the experience of eating so pleasurable. The taste, sight, sound, smell, and feel of food add to the enjoyment of eating. Food is truly a feast for the senses.

Making conscious choices about food and paying attention to the sensory experience of eating is called mindful eating. Someone who eats mindfully is more in tune with their internal cues of hunger and fullness. They notice when they're just starting to feel full. At that point, they know that if they stop eating, they'll feel satisfied, but not uncomfortably full. Eating mindfully makes overeating less likely.

You've probably heard that it takes at least 15-20 minutes for the stomach to "tell" the brain that it's full. It stands to reason that, while the stomach is waiting on cue, eating slowly results in consuming less food.

According to research, this may be exactly what happens. A recent study in *The Journal of Clinical Endocrinology and Metabolism* showed that men who spent 30 minutes eating a serving of ice cream felt fuller than men who ate the ice cream in five minutes. Research published in the *The British Medical Journal* in 2008 showed that people who ate quickly and ate until they were full had tripled the risk of being overweight. And another 2008 study published in *The Journal of the American Dietetic Association* found that women who ate lunch slowly (29 minutes, on average) consumed 67 fewer calories, drank more water during the meal and felt more satisfied after the meal compared to women who ate quickly (9 minutes, on average). The women in the study were instructed to eat more slowly by taking small bites, putting utensils down between bites, and chewing each bite 20-30 times before taking another bite.

### There are several strategies to eat more mindfully:

- Eat fewer meals in the car, at your desk, standing up, or in a rush.
- Eat more meals as if they were special occasions, like a birthday, anniversary or romantic dinner: Use nice dinnerware (*no paper plates or plastic utensils*), dim the lights and light unscented candles.
- Before you get overly hungry, decide what food sounds good to you.
- Eat in a pleasant, relaxed environment. Eliminate distractions (*TV; cell phone*). Listen to soft, relaxing music.
- Before you begin eating, take a few deep breaths and relax.
- Pay attention to what is happening in this moment. *What do you feel? What do you see? What do you hear?*
- Now, begin to eat—slowly, savoring every bite. Notice aromas, tastes and textures.
- Every so often, pause to notice how you're feeling.



By practicing mindful eating at least once a day, you'll soon become more comfortable with it and notice increased enjoyment in eating and other benefits. Keeping a journal of your thoughts and feelings will speed the process. Gradually add mindful eating to other meals and snacks until eating mindfully becomes second nature.

*Recommended Resources:*

*Intuitive Eating* (book or audio CD set) by Tribole & Resch

*Secrets of Feeding a Healthy Family* by Ellyn Satter

*Eat What You Love, Love What You Eat* by Michelle May

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## Mindful Eating Practice

Start with a small amount of one type of food that won't trigger overeating, such as a slice of banana or one or two grapes (*instead of a potato chip, for example*).

- Pick up the food and hold it in your hand. Tune into your senses. Smell the food; notice its shape, color and how it feels. If your mind wanders, gently bring it back to the food.
- Place the food in your mouth. Be aware of your thoughts and feelings. You may feel anticipation or disappointment. Let the thoughts come and go.
- As you begin to chew, notice the burst of flavor (*the tartness; the sweetness*) as the food breaks down in your mouth.
- Notice the flavors as they begin to fade. You may have a strong desire to take another bite, but rather than going for another hit of flavor, see if you can relax and stay with what you're experiencing in this moment.
- Stay with the sensations as the food reaches your stomach. Recognize that you've taken in the nutrition of one bite of the food.
- Once you finish the entire process, take another bite, if you choose. Notice if you have a craving for a lot more. Notice if you are still physically hungry.
- You may notice how eating just one bite offers a lot of satisfaction. Or, you may have a craving for a different food. Mindfulness brings you back to the present moment, to the experience of eating one bite at a time. By allowing yourself to stay with the taste and feel of one bite, the possibility of satisfaction opens.
- What does one bite offer? How many bites does it take to experience satisfaction? Let each bite reveal the answer.

*Adapted from The Center for Mindful Eating: [tcm.e.org](http://tcm.e.org)*

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