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*Harvard Health Letter* {[http://www.health.harvard.edu/newsletters/harvard\\_health\\_letter/2011/february](http://www.health.harvard.edu/newsletters/harvard_health_letter/2011/february)}

## Mindful eating

*Slow down, you're eating too fast. Distracted, hurried eating may add pounds and take away pleasure.*

Does this sound familiar?

You're at your computer, facing a wall of e-mails. After composing a reply, you hit "send" and reach for the bulging tuna wrap on your desk. After a few bites, chewing while glancing at the screen, you set the wrap down, grab a handful of chips, and open the next message. Before you know it, you've finished lunch without even noticing it.

A small yet growing body of research suggests that a slower, more thoughtful way of eating could help with weight problems and maybe steer some people away from processed food and other less-healthy choices.

This alternative approach has been dubbed "mindful eating." It's based on the Buddhist concept of mindfulness, which involves being fully aware of what is happening within and around you at the moment. In other areas, mindfulness techniques have been proposed as a way to relieve stress and alleviate problems like high blood pressure and chronic gastrointestinal difficulties.

Applied to eating, mindfulness includes noticing the colors, smells, flavors, and textures of your food; chewing slowly; getting rid of distractions like TV or reading; and learning to cope with guilt and anxiety about food. Some elements of mindful eating seem to harken back to the ideas of Horace Fletcher, an early 20th century food faddist who believed chewing food thoroughly would solve many different kinds of health problems.

### The mind-gut connection

Digestion involves a complex series of hormonal signals between the gut and the nervous system, and it seems to take about 20 minutes for the brain to register satiety (fullness). If someone eats too quickly, satiety may occur after overeating instead of putting a stop to it. There's also reason to believe that eating while we're distracted by activities like driving or typing may slow down or stop digestion in a manner similar to how the "fight or flight" response does. And if we're not digesting well, we may be missing out on the full nutritive value of some of the food we're consuming.

Lilian Cheung, a nutritionist and lecturer at the Harvard School of Public Health, lays out the rationale for mindful eating as a way to shed pounds in her 2010 book *Savor: Mindful Eating, Mindful Life*, which she co-wrote with Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh. The book, which fuses science and Buddhist philosophy, has spawned a lively Facebook page where people post recipes and other healthy living tips.

Stephanie Meyers, a dietician at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, uses mindfulness techniques to help cancer patients with their diets in a number of different ways; for example, she'll encourage survivors of head and neck cancer to meditate on food as they're making the occasionally difficult transition from a feeding tube back to eating again. One such meditation might involve having patients bite into an apple slice, close their eyes, and focus on the sensory experience of tasting, chewing, and swallowing.

## A starter kit

Experts suggest starting gradually with mindful eating, eating one meal a day or week in a slower, more attentive manner. Here are some tips (and tricks) that may help you get started:

- Set your kitchen timer to 20 minutes, and take that time to eat a normal-sized meal.
- Try eating with your non-dominant hand; if you're a righty, hold your fork in your left hand when lifting food to your mouth.
- Use chopsticks if you don't normally use them.
- Eat silently for five minutes, thinking about what it took to produce that meal, from the sun's rays to the farmer to the grocer to the cook.
- Take small bites and chew well.
- Before opening the fridge or cabinet, take a breath and ask yourself, "Am I really hungry?" Do something else, like reading or going on a short walk.

## A treatment for bingers

Several studies have shown that mindful eating strategies might help treat eating disorders and possibly help with weight loss. Psychologist Jean Kristeller at Indiana State University and colleagues at Duke University conducted an NIH-funded study of mindful eating techniques for treatment of binge eating. The randomized controlled study included 150 binge eaters and compared a mindfulness-based therapy to a standard psychoeducational treatment and a control group. Both active treatments produced declines in bingeing and depression, but the mindfulness-based therapy seemed to help people enjoy their food more and have less sense of struggle about controlling their eating. Those who meditated more (both at mealtimes and throughout the day) got more out of the program.

Kristeller and others say mindfulness helps people recognize the difference between emotional and physical hunger and satiety and introduces a "moment of choice" between the urge and eating.

The NIH is funding additional research by Kristeller and Ruth Wolever of Duke on the effectiveness of mindfulness-based approaches for weight loss and maintenance. Several other studies on mindful eating are under way around the country.

Originally published: February 2011

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