

Eating Mindfully

| A Guide to Nutrition Tracking



When life gets busy, it can be challenging to keep track of our food intake and the nutrients we consume to maintain our health. Throughout the day, we often mindlessly reach for snacks while watching TV or go for seconds after a meal, even if we're not actually hungry.

A great way to become more engaged with your nutrition is by practicing mindful eating. This technique, rooted in mindfulness, involves paying attention to what you're eating, how you're eating, and recognizing hunger cues to understand why you're eating. Mindful eating aims to be a sustainable practice, helping you develop habits that benefit you both physically and mentally. It contrasts with fad diets, which involve short-term changes to achieve a specific goal rather than establishing long-term lifestyle adjustments. To start incorporating mindful eating into your life, here are six tips:

01 Start at the Grocery Store

Mindful nutrition begins at the grocery store with the items you choose to purchase. Before you go shopping, plan your meals for the week and list the ingredients needed for each meal. By documenting what you intend to buy, you reduce the likelihood of mindlessly grabbing items displayed at the front of the store. However, it's important to remember that there's no harm in occasionally treating yourself if it's something you enjoy.

Another tip is to eat before you go shopping. Studies show that we tend to make impulse purchases and buy high-calorie foods when we're hungry because we make decisions based on how our stomachs feel at that moment. Try going to the store after a meal to prevent this.

02 Slow down your eating

In the U.S., we often eat quickly, partly due to our reliance on fast food and the limited time many work and school environments allow for meals. However, eating rapidly can lead to digestive issues like indigestion and gas. It can also result in overeating, as it takes about 20 minutes for the brain to register that the stomach is full.

Slowing down and savoring each bite can enhance feelings of fullness and satisfaction. Since the foods we eat are often the most enjoyable, it's important to take the time to appreciate each bite and the flavors that make the food delicious. This practice encourages greater appreciation and gratitude for the small pleasures in life.

03 Get an understanding of your body's hunger signals

Sometimes, it can be difficult to distinguish between true hunger and boredom or cravings. To determine if you're genuinely hungry, pay attention to your body's signals. Are you feeling fatigued or having trouble focusing? Is your stomach growling or do you feel nauseous? These may be signs that it's time to eat.

A good indicator of true hunger is if you feel like you could eat anything tasty that's put in front of you, as opposed to craving a specific food or type of food. Recognizing these signals can help you make better eating choices throughout the day.

04 Unplug while you eat

It is always enjoyable to get cozy on the couch with our food next to us while we watch TV. However, this practice can distract us and cause us to overeat, as we aren't listening to our brains telling us that we are satiated. When you eat a meal, try putting your phone down or turning off your TV or gaming console and really focus on what you are eating. This helps calm your mind and allows you to relax while enjoying your meal.

05 Know when your body is satisfied

As mentioned earlier, your brain needs around 20 minutes or more to receive hormones from your gut, like leptin and cholecystokinin, which signal fullness. This happens because your brain and gut are interconnected through your enteric nervous system. Due to this connection, your emotions significantly impact what you eat and how your brain recognizes that your body is full. For example, if you eat a meal that you don't particularly enjoy, you might decide to eat something else to satisfy your hunger, even if you've had enough. Similarly, when you're anxious, you might lose your appetite and undereat, even if your body needs more food to function. To be fully in tune with your hunger and fullness signals, you must also be in tune with your emotions. So next time you're stressed and reach for junk food, consider whether you're truly hungry or responding to your emotions with food.

06 Track your meals

A great way to understand your eating habits is by tracking your meals. Many apps allow you to digitally log your meals each day. With these apps, you can visualize the types of foods you eat, the volume, the nutritional facts, and the emotions you feel while eating. You can also set personalized goals, such as drinking more water or adding more vegetables to each plate.

Remember, there is no strict formula to follow when making nutritional choices. The goal of mindful eating is not to restrict certain foods but to increase awareness of how food impacts you and find what works best for you. If you have specific questions about your diet, please consult your primary care doctor, nutritionist, or dietitian.