

Cueing Into Your Eating Patterns

by Julie A. Smith, MS, RD

En Español (Spanish Version)

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Mindful Eating



When someone is trying to lose weight, one common piece of advice is "Eat only when you are hungry." It sounds simple enough, but the reasons that people eat can be very complex, and many have nothing at all to do with hunger. Our internal cues are influenced by all sorts of other signals streaming in from the outside. Tracking down those "other signals" has kept scientists busy and yielded some surprising research on our eating patterns. Do you recognize yourself in any of these patterns?

The Myth of the "Light Lunch"

Feeling virtuous because you had a "light lunch"? Chances are good that you are compensating for it later in the day. A study conducted by scientists at the National Center for Toxicology monitored the amount of fat typically eaten at lunch by 17 subjects. The researchers gave the participants meals during three different periods. All of the meals contained the same amount of fat as the participants' usual lunch, but the subjects were told that the meals had either less, more, or the same amount of fat than what they usually ate.

The results? When people thought they were eating less fat at lunch, they ate more calories than when they were told the meal was high-fat. They also ate more of their calories from fat compared to both the "low-fat" and "normal" periods.

The Power of Suggestion

While having "just a bite" of that death-by-chocolate cake may sound reasonable and may work well for some people, a study shows that it can backfire. Forty-six college students were divided into two groups: fed and hungry. Then, for 90 seconds, students either looked at a photograph of chocolate, tasted a piece of chocolate, listened to a description of chocolate, or were given no "chocolate stimulus."

People who had tasted or seen chocolate reported a greater desire to eat chocolate than people who had heard about chocolate. However, when each subject was given a half pound of chocolate, there was no difference among any of the groups in the amount of chocolate actually eaten.

Early Diners

You skip breakfast and grab a lunchtime snack from the vending machine. Before you know it, it is four o'clock and the most you have eaten is a few pretzels. So when you walk through the door after work, you make a beeline to the fridge.

Researchers from the City University of New York combed through the food diaries of more than 1,800 women looking for a connection between women's weight and what percentage of their daily calories they ate after 5:00 PM. While they did not find the connection they were looking for, they did discover something else. Women who consume most of their calories before 5:00 PM generally eat a more healthful diet than those who pack more

calories in after hours. Early eaters ate less fat, protein, and alcohol and more carbohydrates, folate, vitamin C, and vitamin B6 than late eaters.

Sweet Smell of Stress

Does stress make you reach for the chocolate chip cookies? You are not alone. Researchers hiked women's stress levels by forcing them to watch a video of industrial accidents, and then put them in a room with sweet, salty, and bland snacks. Compared to women who watched a more pleasant travelogue video, the stressed women ate nearly twice as many sweets. Men, however, had the opposite response. In general, the stressed-out men ate less of everything than the more relaxed men.

Tempo Tantrum

Listening to a zippy little mealtime tune may seem festive, but it can encourage you to eat more than you intended. Several studies have shown that our forks seem to synch up to mealtime music. When fast music is played during meals, people eat more bites per minute, take bigger bites, chew their food less, and eat more calories than when slower music or no music is played.

The More the Merrier

Meeting friends for dinner is a great way to unwind, but could pack some extra calories into your day. Psychologists from the University of Toronto served dinner to 120 women, either alone, in pairs, or in groups. Some women ate with friends, some with strangers, and some alone. Lone diners ate less than those who dined in pairs or groups. And women who ate with friends ate more dessert than those who ate with strangers.

The Key to Taming the Cues: "Conscious" Eating

Does all this mean you should eat alone in a quiet room with blinders on? Of course not. Researchers are just beginning to tease out the complexities of our eating behaviors. And the more influences they turn up, the more confusing our food habits seem. Coming up with a plan to combat each outside cue could make you crazy, but developing a habit of "eating consciously" can help put you in control. Ultimately, conscious eating involves being aware and, above all, truly enjoying your food. So here are some tips to help you get the upper hand at mealtimes.

Learn your body's hunger cues. Everyone's body responds differently to hunger. Maybe your stomach growls, or you have trouble concentrating. Maybe your stomach just feels empty. Know how to read your signals. When you reach for seconds or that bag of chips, stop and listen to your body. Are you really hungry?

Set a calm mealtime atmosphere. Avoid controversial topics during meals. Talking about how you cannot afford a new roof or the layoffs at the office can wait until after dinner. Come to the table relaxed. Take five minutes to close your eyes and take some deep breaths. Turn the music off or play some mellow tunes. Save the lively stuff for later. Light some candles.

Give your body time to register the meal. Eat slowly and wait at least fifteen minutes before reaching for seconds. It takes that long for your stomach to signal your brain that it is full.

Savor your food. Even if you are caught up in conversation with others, be sure to appreciate the textures, flavors, and aromas of your food.

Support your local food markets. Aim to counteract fast food and fast life. Preserve local food traditions and interest in the food you eat. Know where it comes from, how it tastes, and how your food choices affect the rest of the world. Being more in tune with your food will influence what and how much you eat.

RESOURCES:

American Dietetic Association

<http://www.eatright.org>

Nutrition.gov

<http://www.nutrition.gov/>

Slow Food Movement

<http://www.slowfood.com/>

CANADIAN RESOURCES:

Canada's Food Guide

http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/food-guide-aliment/index_e.html/

Dietitians of Canada

<http://www.dietitians.ca/>

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