

[IMAGE]

The Health Benefits of Mindful Eating

By Julie T. Chen, MD

On-the-go eating is almost inevitable these days; we're all guilty of it. If you've munched on protein bars in the car or eaten your dinner in front of the TV, you've likely participated in distracted eating before. Rushed eating habits are unfortunately a common side effect of our fast-paced society. Snack foods and fast-food drive-throughs are making it easier for us to eat on the go, but we've forgotten the importance of sitting down for meals to truly enjoy our food.

Rushed or distracted eating is actually harmful for the body, often causing us to overeat or feel hungrier throughout the day, eventually leading to weight gain. Below are five tips for mindful eating to help slow down your food intake and make room for more conscious eating habits.

Sit, Don't Stand, for Meals

Designating time for relaxation and meal enjoyment is key to managing portions and avoiding overeating. By setting aside time for three square meals a day and avoiding multitasking while eating, you not only have time to enjoy the food you eat, but you also consume less. Sit down for at least 20 minutes and devote time solely to eating without distractions.

Put Away the Distractions

Speaking of distractions, eating in front of the TV, taking your lunch break while catching up on emails or eating while driving are all mindless food habits that lead to overeating. When we are distracted, we often don't realize how much food we actually take in. By putting our focus on work or television, you take the attention and intention out of the food in front of you.

Studies suggest distracted eating leads to consuming more food later on in the day, increasing your caloric intake. When focus has shifted away from your dinner plate, your body "forgets" it has eaten, increasing the risk that you'll snack between meals.

Make Your Car a No-Food Zone

If you're prone to snacking in your car on the way to work, the gym or other destinations, cut out the temptation by making your car a no-food zone. Limit yourself to water or other beverages, as eating in the car can lead to excessive snacking. When your concentration is on the road, it's hard to keep track of how much food you consume. Noshing on chips or pretzels straight from the bag after a grocery run, or stopping for a snack at the drive-through, adds excess calories and leaves you feeling hungry sooner.

Slow It Down

When you eat slowly, you digest food more effectively and also maintain a feeling of satisfaction regarding what you eat. It takes the brain about 20 minutes from the start of a meal to send a signal to your body that it is full. Eating in a rushed manner, therefore, causes you to overeat food and get that uncomfortable "stuffed" feeling. By pacing yourself during meals, you end up paying attention to what you eat and feel full without the bloated feeling you get when you eat too much.

Practice Mindful Eating

Mindful eating means practicing awareness when it comes to what's on your plate, including paying attention to the colors, smell and taste of the food you eat. If you're new to mindful eating, start off by consciously practicing it once or twice a week, increasing gradually until all meals are consumed this way.

Take small bites and fully chew your food, savoring the flavors and textures of your meal. If slowing down is still an issue, eat with your non-dominant hand or even use chopsticks. Changing up the utensils you eat with can force you to slow down your food intake.

Set a timer and monitor how long it takes you to finish a meal – if you're clearing your plate in less than 20 minutes, slow it down. You may discover doing this actually helps your body consume less, but actually feel more full.

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