

Intuitive Eating

What is intuitive eating?

Intuitive eating is also known as the “no-diet approach”. It is structured around the belief that people need to trust themselves enough to believe that they will eat what and how much food that they need. Very few people are able to handle a traditional diet as a temporary or flexible plan, and they instead become embroiled in an endless cycle of dieting, bingeing, and guilt. Intuitive eating teaches you to listen to your inner signals of hunger and fullness, and to respond accordingly.

This does not mean that you should eat whatever you want, whenever your stomach starts to growl. You still must pay attention to proper nutrition but don't deny yourself your favorites. If you want ice cream and nothing else will do, go ahead and have a ½ cup serving. Savor every bite and eat it slowly. The point is to stop telling yourself that you “cannot” or “should not” eat certain foods. It is not about what you eat or when you eat, but how you feel about what you are eating.

Food habituation research has proven that the more times a person is exposed to food, the less appealing it becomes over time. This is why people on traditional weight-loss diets find themselves obsessing with what they “cannot” have. For instance, some people do not allow sweets into their house, because they feel that they cannot trust themselves to have control. When these people are confronted with sweets in a social setting, they are likely to find themselves eating more than they even want, because they are not sure when they will have the chance to eat sweets again.

What is wrong with traditional weight-loss diets?

A review of the scientific literature on diets proves two things. First, diets generally do lead to weight loss. An average of 5%–10% of body weight is lost in most clinical trials. Second, the weight loss is not maintained. The question is not whether or not the weight is regained, but how long it will take for this to happen following completion of a weight-loss plan. Furthermore, these diets teach people to ignore their natural hunger cues and to look at food as the enemy. Frighteningly enough, “weight cycling” seems to lead to overall higher rates of mortality. Links are hypothesized between weight cycling and heart attack, stroke, diabetes, hypertension, and suppressed immune function.

What are the benefits of intuitive eating?

A study conducted at Brigham Young University showed that 24 female students following the intuitive eating plan had a reduced body mass index (BMI), lowered triglyceride levels, increased high-density lipoprotein (HDL) levels, and reduced overall risk for cardiovascular disease. In addition, the plan leads to better body image and a diet with higher nutritional quality, which has multiple health benefits.

Who is a candidate for this approach?

Intuitive eating is a wise-eating approach for all people. However, it was originally designed for “chronic dieters.” It is especially useful for people with perfectionistic tendencies, addictive personalities, a strong-learned connection between love and food, and distorted body images, and people who are no longer reliable judges of when they are and are not hungry.

What about exercise?

Exercise is strongly encouraged. It leads to a better understanding of the mind-body connection. Do not concentrate on how many calories you are burning. Instead, focus on how good it feels to move your body and how the food that you ate is fueling your activity.

How should I get started with intuitive eating?

1. Start by observing when you are eating.
2. Ask yourself the following:
 - Am I eating in social situations as a way of keeping busy?
 - Am I eating at the movie theater, simply because it is a tradition for me?
 - Am I eating as a way to expel nervous tension or to deal with boredom?

These are all signs that you are not eating intuitively.

3. Pay attention to your hunger level.
4. Every time that you eat, rate your hunger on a scale of 1–10 (10 as really hungry), and if the number is low, try to figure out why you are eating.
5. Understand that one meal or one day will not have any long-term effects on your health or weight. Nutrition is progressive, and your health is built on a pattern of lifestyle choices. You are not a “good” or “bad” person because of what or how you eat, and “good” or “bad” foods do not exist.

References and recommended readings

Bacon L, Stern J, Van Loan MD, Keim NL. Size acceptance and intuitive eating improve health for obese, female chronic dieters. *J Am Diet Assoc.* 2005;105:929-936.

Intuitive Eating Pros. What is intuitive eating? Available at: <http://www.intuitiveeating.org/content/what-intuitive-eating>. Accessed November 16, 2011.

Mann T, Tomiyama AJ, Westling E, Lew AM, Samuels B, Chatman J. Medicare's search for effective obesity treatments: diets are not the answer. *Am Psychol.* 2007;62:220-233.

Hunger Scale

- 10: Stuffed. You are so full you feel nauseous.
- 9: Very uncomfortably full. You need to loosen your clothes.
- 8: Uncomfortable full. You feel bloated.
- 7: Full. A little bit uncomfortable.
- 6: Perfectly comfortable. You feel satisfied.
- 5: Comfortable. You're more or less satisfied, but could eat a little more.
- 4: Slightly uncomfortable. You're just beginning to feel signs of hunger.
- 3: Uncomfortably hungry. Your stomach is rumbling.
- 2: Very uncomfortable. You feel irritable and unable to concentrate.
- 1: Weak and light-headed. Your stomach acid is churning.

- ❖ You should eat only when you're feeling 1, 2, 3 or 4.
- ❖ Put your fork down at 5 or 6. Wait until next scheduled meal or snack.
- ❖ If you're trying to lose weight, stop at 5, the point at which you're eating a little less than your body is burning.

The following table offers a comparison between the restriction that comes from dieting/disordered eating and the decision to set a limit to the amount of food one eats, based on physical comfort:

Restricting	Setting Limits
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set in Advance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is determined during the meal
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Predetermines type of food and quantity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is connected with the feeling of fullness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Based on goal of weight loss or to feel a sense of control 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Based on a desire to not feel overfull and uncomfortable
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Puts one at risk for feelings of deprivation and rebound overeating or binging 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can make one feel vulnerable to feeling the sadness that comes with having to stop eating when full