

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.