

Nourish Yourself with Mindful Eating

Mindful eating is when you give full attention to eating and your experience with food. Often this includes all your senses as you explore and enjoy food with as much awareness as possible.

Eating is important for nourishing and fueling our bodies, and for overall health. It is also common to eat for reasons beyond physical hunger, such as eating in response to emotions, the environment, and/or food cravings. These are known as the three types of hunger:



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Types of Hunger

- *Physical hunger* is in response to your body's need for food for survival, your stomach grumbles when you are experiencing physical hunger.
- *Heart hunger* is when emotions drive our eating. Snacking when you are bored at night or eating a chocolate bar after a stressful day at work are examples of heart hunger.
- *Mouth hunger* are cravings for specific taste or texture of food such as sweet and creamy (e.g., ice cream), or salty and crunchy (e.g., potato chips).

When we eat in response to feelings, this is known as **emotional eating** or **stress eating**. A food craving, on the other hand, occurs when you have the urge to eat something specific like salty or sweet. When your eating habits are triggered by your environment, this is referred to as problematic eating.

Emotional eating or giving way to cravings can persist and become a regular habit, as can eating while engaging in other activities like driving, watching tv, or while on your computer surfing the internet. If done too often, you can lose touch with the enjoyment of food. It can also contribute to eating more than your body needs or overindulging in less nutritious food choices.

If your eating habits are becoming challenging to manage, consider **mindful eating** as a strategy to get back on track. Mindful eating involves paying attention to the food and the experience of eating and starts with asking yourself "why am I eating?". When you take the time to reflect on why you eat, then you increase your awareness around your eating patterns.

Raising your Awareness

We eat for many reasons besides physical hunger. Eating can be related to the time of day (e.g., 2 pm energy crash at work), associations with certain activities (e.g., eating while watching TV), certain environmental cues prompting you to eat (e.g., buying a candy bar while paying for gas), as well as using food to cope with life's stressors. Whatever the reason may be, when you have awareness regarding your eating patterns, then you will be better equipped to engage in solutions. If you don't know what your habits are, then you won't know what solutions make sense for you!

Questions to ask yourself when practicing mindful eating:

- When do I eat? Do I eat at regular times, skip meals, or eat late?
- How much do I eat? Do I have larger or smaller portions? Or does the amount I eat depend on the time of day or the meal I am having?
- How fast do I eat? Do I eat quickly or take the time to eat?
- Where do I eat? Do I sit in the lunchroom at work or eat at my desk? At home, do I sit at my dining table or in front of the TV or computer?
- How do I eat? Do I eat when distracted? Or secretly? Do I set aside time to eat?



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Strategies and Tools for Mindful Eating

Once you become aware of your patterns, choose some tools and solutions that can help you eat more mindfully. Some examples include:

- *Rate your hunger* using a scale from 1-10 where one is equal to feeling very hungry and ten is very full. Find the hunger and fullness scale here: [Alberta Health Services Hunger and Fullness Signals](#).
- *Engage in eating food mindfully.* Close your eyes and eat the food very slowly. Savour the taste, texture, and feel, as well as your body's response such as increased saliva production and positive emotional response.
- *Eat Sensibly.* Use your five senses to experience the food, look at the food, touch and feel the texture and temperature, listen to the sound of the utensil(s) or opening the wrapper, smell it, and savour the food.
- *Take it easy while eating:* It may be easier to control the food portion when you mindfully enjoy and experience the food rather than mindlessly chewing and swallowing it.



- *Improve self-talk:* Become aware of your thoughts. Are your thoughts telling you to indulge in a food even if you are not hungry? Take a time out and do something else instead of eating, such as going for a walk or calling a friend. You'll be surprised at how much resilience you can build when you decide to look after yourself in a different way.
- *Be kind to yourself:* People with a history of dieting, avoiding some food groups to promote weight loss and going more than 5-6 hours between eating usually have a harder time managing their food cravings and emotional eating. Aim to include 3 meals and 1-3 snacks everyday or try to space your meals and healthy snacks 2 to 3 hours apart.
- *Enjoy your meal experience:* Make your mealtimes as positive and relaxing as possible. Try to create a relaxing environment, avoid distractions, sit comfortably, and plan eating at least one meal together with your family.

Do you want to learn more about mindful eating, non-food ways to cope with stress, emotional eating, and hunger cues? Click on the resources and links below for more information:

- Alberta Health Services: Hunger and Fullness Signals
<https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/assets/info/nutrition/if-nfs-hunger-and-fullness-signals.pdf>
- Unlock Food: Healthy Habits to Cope with Stress
<https://www.unlockfood.ca/en/Articles/Alcohol-and-smoking/Healthy-Habits-to-Cope-with-Stress.aspx>
- Canada's Food Guide: Be Mindful of Your Eating Habits
<https://food-guide.canada.ca/en/healthy-eating-recommendations/be-mindful-of-your-eating-habits/>
- Craving Change is a program that addresses problematic eating and ways to change your relationship with food. Want to find out more about the Craving Change program? Ask your dietitian or contact CarePoint Health for more information.
<https://www.cravingchange.ca/>

