

# THE POWER OF SLOW EATING

Something amazing happens when you pay close attention to how you eat. Here's how your body can benefit when you simply take the time to enjoy your next meal.

By Locke Hughes

**W**hat did you have for lunch yesterday? Maybe you ate a turkey sandwich or a chopped salad.

Now, can you describe the flavors, smells and textures of each bite you took? Do you remember how hungry you were before you ate or how full you felt after?

Chances are, you hardly gave any of it a second thought. And you wouldn't be the only one. We live in an age of fast food and on-the-go meals, with lunches scarfed down at our desks while we stare at screens and dinners eaten on the couch, watching Netflix. We slurp low-fat smoothies, buy low-calorie snack bars and spend \$20 billion every year on weight-loss products and diet books. Yet more than 70 percent of Americans are overweight, while almost 40 percent are obese.

Clearly, our current attitude toward food is failing us. The problem? "Dieting doesn't work," says Marsha Hindahl, president of The Center for Mindful Eating and co-owner of Green Mountain at Fox Run. Research shows that at least 80 percent of people who lose weight on a diet will gain it back, sometimes gaining even more than when they started. The good news: There is a solution for these weight-loss woes. It's called mindful eating, and it's a way of eating that truly supports your overall well-being. Hindahl says. Plus, it can help you reach your natural, healthy weight in the process while enjoying all the foods you love.

Through mindful eating, you rediscover what your body is trying to tell you. There are no rules or restrictions, unlike the diets that 108 million of us are on. Even better: Once you've acquired the skill, you have it for life. Ready to get started? Read on.

## HOW TO MASTER MINDFUL EATING

The first tenet of mindful eating—being fully aware—stems from the Buddhist practice of mindfulness. "While you're eating, focus intentionally on your food, noticing all sensations and taking in the flavors, textures, smells and colors," says Meredith Milton, a Seattle-based nutritionist and mindful eating coach. As you eat, savor each bite, slow down and chew thoroughly.

Avoiding judgment is another key part of mindful eating. "Don't label food as 'good' or 'bad,' or think to yourself, 'I shouldn't be eating this,'" Milton says. These labels are coming from your head, not your body, and they set you up to feel guilty about eating, which is the opposite of being present. If your mind does wander into judgment territory, spot that happening, but then bring your awareness back to simply noticing the food and how it makes you feel.

With mindful eating, you'll take time to slow down to enjoy every bite—along with the company you keep.





## TRY THE RAISIN EXPERIMENT

You've probably gobbled down handfuls of raisins in your life. But did you ever take the time to eat a single, individual raisin? Really eat it? The raisin challenge is an exercise taught by many mindfulness teachers to raise awareness about eating mindfully. Follow this experiment from the Greater Good in Action program at UC Berkeley.



> **SEE IT** Take a raisin and hold it, focusing your full attention on all of the ridges and hollows.



> **TOUCH IT** Turn the raisin over, feeling the texture. Close your eyes to enhance the feeling.



> **SMELL IT** Hold the raisin under your nose and breathe in. Notice its smell, as well as how your mouth or stomach might react to the scent.



> **TASTE IT** Gently place the raisin in your mouth. Don't chew yet—give your tongue a moment to explore the texture. When you're ready, take just a bite or two and notice what happens, including any taste that comes from chewing it. Before you swallow, notice the sensation of tastes and texture in your mouth and how that may change moment by moment. Finally, swallow it, consciously noticing the sensation. See how your body as a whole feels after you've eaten it.



When? Cheese? Nothing's really off limits when you eat mindfully—simply savoring the taste will help you eat less.

Next up: Tune into your hunger and fullness cues. "Before, during and after your meal, ask yourself, 'How hungry am I on a scale of 0 to 10?'" Milton suggests. If 0 is finished and 10 is stuffed, you want to stay between a 3 or 4 and 6 or 7.

Checking in with your hunger level also helps you recognize that what your body needs may not be food at all. "If you're at a 6 before eating, there may be something else that's making you 'hungry,' like boredom, stress, procrastination, sadness or a lack of connection," says Milton.

Realizing that those needs are separate from food is a big part of what mindful eating is all about, she adds. For example, instead of eating ice cream after dinner, you may need to spend some quality time with your spouse or children. Or instead of devouring a bag of chips at 3 p.m., you might feel better with a quick walk around the block.

Now, let's be real: We're all busy, and this sounds like a lot of time and energy to put into eating a meal. But the more you practice mindful eating, the more it becomes second nature, notes Hudnall. "It's actually much less work and requires less attention and time than dieting," she explains. "While dieting gets harder over time, mindful eating becomes easier. It just becomes the way you eat."



## 5 PROVEN BENEFITS OF EATING SLOWLY

**1. You can eat anything you want.** This might be the best part of eating mindfully: No foods are off limits. You can eat a cheeseburger mindfully. You can eat a bowl of pasta mindfully. You can even eat a piece of chocolate cake mindfully—and you may enjoy it more while wanting less. When you're fully present with a burger or piece of cake, you realize

how fatty or sweet it truly tastes and how it makes you feel. "When we have permission to eat whatever we want, it makes you less likely to reach for the foods that don't make you feel good," Milton says.

**2. Your taste buds may change.** "People can learn a lot about taste preferences by eating mindfully," Milton says. When you slow down and truly tune in to your body, you start to realize how much better it feels to eat more real—not processed—foods.

**3. You may lose weight.** Tuning in to your body's hunger and fullness cues and getting to know your true taste preferences can help you reach a healthy weight. Hudnall explains: "However, mindful eating may be better thought of as an approach to self-care and a way to improve overall health rather than solely a weight-loss tool," she notes.

**4. Your digestion improves.** Dealing with gas, bloating or other GI issues? Mindful eating may work wonders. Chewing your food more slowly helps your body digest it better, thanks to the enzymes released by saliva, Milton explains. Plus, it can help you realize certain food intolerances that could be causing digestive distress.

## 8 STEPS TO A MORE MINDFUL MEAL

> **STEP 1:** Ban distractions. No looking at TV or the computer, no phone, no reading a book or magazine.

> **STEP 2:** Take at least one long, deep breath. Be aware of how you might be feeling at that moment. How hungry are you? Are you stressed? Relaxed? Try to exhale any tension from your day.

> **STEP 3:** Look at the food as if you've never seen it before. Notice the smells, textures, colors and any noises it might make.

> **STEP 4:** Take your first bite. Place it in your mouth and maybe even close your eyes. Observe the flavor, texture and temperature of the food.

> **STEP 5:** Chew your food thoroughly. When you swallow, notice what that feels like. If your mind starts wandering off, notice that happening, then go back to observing your food.

> **STEP 6:** Slow down. Put your fork or spoon down between bites. Eating with chopsticks or your nondominant hand can also help you pace your meal.

> **STEP 7:** Pause about a third of the way through the meal and ask: Do I feel satisfied? Do I feel like I've had enough? Does the food still taste as good?

> **STEP 8:** Repeat steps 4 to 7. Check your hunger levels after eating another third of your plate. When you feel satiated, simply stop eating.