

Mindful Eating for the Holidays and Beyond

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Ask an Expert: Mindful Eating for the Holidays and Beyond

See video at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zsITm-Z0W5M>

Busy schedules and food-centered activities during the holidays can all add up to eating when you're not hungry, making less nutritious food choices and overeating. It is important to pay attention to the process of eating. Be mindful of what and why you eat. Eat for nourishment and satisfaction, and notice how your body feels. Consider these nine tips to help you get through the many food-focused holiday



events.

- **Tune into hunger and fullness cues.** Hunger is a physical sensation. What does it feel like to you?
- **Recognize the desire to eat for reasons other than physical hunger.** When you are physically hungry, it starts off slowly and increases in intensity, you are hungry for a variety of foods, it goes away when you eat, and there is no remorse after eating. With other types of hunger, often caused by stress or busy schedules, it may occur suddenly regardless of the last time you ate, you have a desire for a specific food, it does not go away after eating, and you may feel remorse after eating. It is important to note that everyone eats sometimes for pure enjoyment, but the idea is to bring awareness to it rather than doing it unconsciously.
- **Consider nourishment and satisfaction.** Ask yourself what would feel most satisfying to you. Eat what you love and leave what you like. This may mean choosing your favorite homemade dessert and leaving the store-bought cookies. It's about quality over quantity. Choose foods that you truly enjoy, pay full attention, slow down, and mindfully savor them with all your senses.

- **Minimize distractions and manage environmental triggers.** Turn off electronics and sit down to eat at the table. Use a smaller plate and see if that visual cue helps you feel fuller on less food. Slow down, and put your fork down between bites. Leave a few bites on the plate – it's not necessary to always clean up your plate. Remember that it's okay to say no when offered food, or to take a piece for later. Focus on increasing enjoyment/satisfaction, not on what foods are "off limits." Mindful eating is eating with the intent to feel better after you ate than before – not worse.
 - **Listen to your body.** Ask yourself how you felt the last time you ate whatever you are considering. Will you be hungry again soon? Will you have more or less energy after eating it? Consider balance. If it's been a while since you had a vegetable, ask yourself which vegetable sounds best.
 - **Practice self-care and meet your emotional needs.** If you are not hungry, what do you think you need instead? Schedule regular nutritious meals and snacks, and try not to go into social situations hungry. Identify emotional triggers for eating. If you aren't hungry, what do you think you need instead? A break? Exercise or rest? A visit with a friend? Writing in your journal or meditating?
 - **Prioritize getting enough sleep.** Lack of sleep has been associated with weight gain and is also linked with higher risk of some chronic diseases such as type 2 diabetes. When sleep deprived, the body produces more of the hunger hormone, ghrelin, which can prompt overeating. Foods such as sweets and refined carbs may also seem more rewarding to sleep-deprived people.
 - **Focus on family and friends, rather than on food.** Plan non-food related activities to spend time with loved ones, such as hikes, walks, crafts, etc.
 - **Practice gratitude.** Think about what it took to get the food from the farm, to the grocery store and to your plate. Recognize the people who grew the food, transported it and prepared it. Practice gratitude for the family and friends you are eating with. Studies show that mindful eating can reduce eating in response to external/environmental triggers and help people tune into hunger and fullness cues. This holiday (and always), choose foods that you truly enjoy, pay full attention, slow down, and mindfully savor them with all your senses.
- By: Brittany Bingeman, Utah State University Extension assistant professor

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