



# Managing hunger



**Health**



**Wellness**



**Nutrition**



**Support**

# Introduction

Food is an important part of our lives mainly because we need it to survive. Our bodies are designed to tell us how we feel in relation to eating and when we are full and when we are hungry. It tells us what we like and what we dislike.

Therefore, understanding those signals for hunger becomes Important so that we can plan our lives effectively around food and drink. This becomes even more important with the wide range of high fat, sugar ad salt foods that are marketed and sold to use round every corner. Because our bodies biologically crave nutrients, we should ensure we understand hunger mechanisms to plan our meals and not be caught in a marketing trap.

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## Understanding hunger and satiety

Hunger is the feeling we get when we want to eat. Satiety is the opposite - not feeling hungry, or feeling 'full'. Our bodies are regulated by different hormones that tell us if we are feeling hungry or full. These are called ghrelin and leptin.

**Ghrelin** is released by the stomach when it is empty, telling our brain it's time to eat. Simply put, ghrelin makes us feel hungry when released. As soon as we eat food, our ghrelin levels should decrease, meaning we no longer feel hungry. Ghrelin is highest before we eat and stays at its lowest until about an hour after a meal. It will then gradually increase in anticipation of the next meal.

**Leptin** is released to tell us that we have had enough to eat or are full. It decreases our hunger and we feel full.

## Creating a hormone routine

Ghrelin and leptin can learn our eating patterns. If you have regular meals at the same time each day, you will often find you start to get hungry around the same time.

This is because ghrelin is released in expectation of the meal. For example, if you regularly eat a main meal at 8am, 12noon and 6pm, you can expect your body to feel hungry at those times of day.

If we then skip a meal or eat differently to our usual routine, feelings of hunger can grow quite high - often meaning we reach for something more convenient, or overeat to satisfy the hunger. Therefore, building and maintaining your own routine is important.

## How can hunger hormones help weight loss?

If our hormones are working as they should, ghrelin tells us to eat to prevent starvation, and leptin tells us when to stop eating. However, hormones do not always have a perfect balance.

Being overweight, medical conditions, genetics, types of foods we eat, sleep, and lifestyle can all impact our hunger and satiety hormones, and stop them from working effectively.

People who have more body fat tend to have higher levels of leptin in their body. As a result, a resilience is built up - meaning our feelings of fullness are reduced. This can cause the brain to think that you still need more food and are still hungry, and to keep sending messages for you to eat after you should stop.

This is a repetitive cycle, as you then eat more food than your body needs and increase your levels of leptin even more. It's important to think about the size of our meals and portion sizes rather than just waiting for our body to tell us it's full.

## How to recognise hunger and fullness

A hunger scale can help us learn how to tell the difference between real hunger and situations when we may be fancy something to eat (psychological hunger). It's a quick and simple tool to help manage overeating and snacking too much.

Psychological hunger is when we feel hungry because of our emotions, including stress, sadness, boredom or happiness. When you feel hungry even though you have recently eaten, it's a good idea to check if what you're feeling is really a craving brought on by something psychological.

When you start feeling like you want something to eat, rate your hunger on a scale of one to ten, with one being starving and ten being uncomfortably full.

A rating of five or six means you are satisfied, neither too hungry nor too full. Wait 15-20 minutes after a meal before using this measure to ensure your body has had time to send its signals that you may be full.

### Hunger and fullness scale

The hunger scale is a tool that will allow you to gauge when to eat and how much food to eat. Use this scale before, during and after mealtimes:

- 1 - Starving, weak, dizzy
- 2 - Very hungry, low energy, stomach growling a lot
- 3 - Pretty hungry, stomach is growling a little
- 4 - Starting to feel a little hungry
- 5 - Satisfied, neither hungry nor full
- 6 - A little full, pleasantly full
- 7 - A little uncomfortable
- 8 - Feeling stuffed
- 9 - Very uncomfortable, stomach hurts
- 10 - Beyond full, sick feeling, no desire to look at food

It's a good idea to keep yourself between three and six on the hunger scale. Try not to wait until your hunger gets down to one or two. Instead, eat when your hunger is at three or four. Leaving ourselves to become too hungry often leads to us grabbing the first thing we see, which is often lower in nutritional value, and overeating.

When you sit down to eat a meal, stop and think about how hungry you are. If you feel less hungry than usual, try to eat less food than you normally would. Make sure to stop eating when you reach five or six on the scale.

This can be difficult to get used to at first as many of us have grown up with messages like *"clear your plate or there's no dessert!"*. It can be confusing to leave food on the plate when there are so many messages about limiting food waste, so keep practicing and don't be too hard on yourself as you get used to recognising the signals. Make sure children also learn the same technique and teach them to learn when they are full or hungry.

## Learning when to stop eating

Here are some top tips to consider during meal and snack times...

- Try to stop eating before you get too full. Too full is uncomfortable – it means you ate too much.
- Try to learn what 'satisfied' or 'pleasantly full' feels like for you.
- Relax before you start eating, and then eat slowly.
- Remember that it takes some time for your stomach to tell your brain that you are full. Stop eating two or three times during your meal and check your hunger level. If you are still hungry, keep eating, but check again towards the end.
- Learn what your portion size is, do not be guided by plate size. Practice 'mindful eating'.
- Eat socially with family or friends so you naturally take breaks to talk. This gives you chance to assess whether you are full or still hungry.
- Understand the balance of your meal. Different nutrients can affect how quickly you feel full and how quickly you may feel hungrier again later.
- Try to balance your meals with a full range of nutrients and plenty of fibre from wholegrains fruits and veg. You should aim for a mix of: **carbohydrates** (bread, rice, pasta, fruit and vegetables), **protein** (meat, variety of beans, fish and eggs) and **fat** (dairy, butter, cheese, nuts and peanut butter).
- Processed foods such as crisps, cakes, biscuits and sweets are primarily made up of fats and carbohydrates. These will leave you less satisfied and there is a high risk of overeating.

## Do not deny yourself

Your hunger levels are a strong body signal, and part of keeping your body 'satisfied' on the hunger scale is eating foods that you like and want. If you try to have an eating plan that restricts all the foods that you enjoy, you will not stay with that plan.

A piece of birthday cake or an occasional takeaway can still fit into your healthy eating plan. Just try to keep listening to your body's signals and eat only enough to reach the 'satisfied' level.

## Final thought

We all have different eating patterns for various reasons. While eating three meals and two snacks a day is good advice, it's not realistic for everyone. Think about your own routine and what will make you most successful when managing your hunger.

If you would like to learn more or require more information and support, please get in touch!

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