

Dr Friedman's Guide to Weight Management

It's not *what* you eat but *how* you eat

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America has a serious weight problem, with more than 60% of adults classified as overweight or obese. Starting at age 30, most people gain about a pound per year despite efforts to keep it off. We are bombarded with countless books, articles and infomercials touting the latest fad diet. Despite all of this advice, the average overweight adult finds losing weight a difficult and unpleasant task and nothing has succeeded in making us thinner. Americans are actually eating healthier foods, but they are consuming more calories. The sheer amount of food we eat is a large part of the problem.

Why is it so difficult to lose weight?

We may live in the 21st century, but we have prehistoric genes that helped our ancestors survive countless feast-then-famine cycles. Over thousands of years of human development, genes that prevent weight loss became more advantageous than genes that prevent weight gain. Scientists call this the "thrifty gene hypothesis". Early man benefitted from genes that stored fat when food was plentiful and slowed metabolism when food was scarce. Our early ancestors also expended a large amount of energy hunting and gathering for the food they ate. Nowadays, "hunting and gathering" often means selecting an entree from the freezer and popping it in the microwave. Modern man is consuming more calories than he is expending, and our ancient genes, unaware that no famine will follow, turn this excess into fat.

What role do hormones play?

Hormones play an important role in how and when we eat. Mechanisms that prevent weight loss include signals telling you to eat when hungry, and signals telling your body to decrease its metabolism when food is scarce, such as when you diet. The hormones, leptin (an important hormone released from fat), ghrelin (a stomach hormone), NPY and MSH, among others, signal the body that the person is hungry and should initiate eating. Other factors that may act to regulate metabolism include thyroid hormone, catecholamines and uncoupling proteins. Consequently, a myriad of hormonal signals act to prevent weight loss.

The act of eating also sends out signals to the body. Even early man needed signals, called satiety, to tell the brain when the stomach was full. These signals preserved a limited food supply and prevented sluggishness and vulnerability associated with eating too large of a meal. Leptin has a role in satiety, but the main hormones involved in telling the body to stop eating are hormones released from the stomach and intestine. These include cholecystokinin (CCK), as well as glucagon-like-peptide-1 (GLP-1) and glucagon-like-peptide-2 (GLP-2). These hormones are activated after eating, but take time to signal the brain to halt the desire to eat more. The key point to remember is that we need to eat quite slowly to allow these signals to work. Our western eating habits are bypassing these important signals, so most individuals eat much larger meals than desirable or even necessary. Thus, weight gain is not caused by eating the wrong foods or not exercising, although these are important; rather we eat too much food at one sitting bypassing satiety signals.

One might think that eating several small meals throughout the day (grazing or noshing) would prevent weight gain. Can many small meals insure that my satiety signals are released and received by the brain? These are good questions, but the answer is probably no. People who snack all day usually do not eat nutritional foods. Typically they don't eat because they are hungry, they eat because they are bored/anxious/depressed. They go from slightly full to very full with each snacking episode and underestimate how much food they eat. Eating three regular meals a day ensures that you will eat only when hungry, focus on your food and develop conscious eating. Eating only when hungry at regular mealtimes will allow satiety signals to operate and lead to portion control.

What is the solution?

Americans rarely sit down for a leisurely meal. We eat on the run, in front of a television, at a fast food restaurant, in the car, in bed for a midnight snack, always while doing something else. Because eating is not our primary activity, we eat unconsciously and do not focus our attention on our food. In contrast, Europeans, for the most part, exercise less and eat more fat and caloric-laden foods than their American counterparts, yet there is much less obesity in Europe. One of the reasons is because Europeans eat smaller portions. Another reason is that Europeans take the time to enjoy their meal, allowing ample time for satiety signals to work. This act of focusing on eating and eating slowly has been called "mindful" eating. Our problem is not that we think about food too much, but rather we think about food too little.

The following 8 steps to conscious or "mindful" eating will work well for weight control. Coupled with exercise and good food choices, they will work better for weight loss than fad diets.

- 1) Savor your food. Enjoy each bite. Look forward to your meals.
- 2) Eat 3 meals a day. If you want to skip a meal, skip dinner (but no late night snacks to make up for it).
- 3) Eat only when hungry. Eat only enough to be no longer hungry (not to be full).
- 4) Eat only in your kitchen, dining room or lunch room table.
- 5) Don't do anything else when eating, besides talking to your family and friends. Don't read, work on the computer, talk on the phone or watch TV.
- 6) Eat slowly. Chew slowly. Take small bites. Put your utensils down between bites.
- 7) Put a small portion on your plate and remove the serving platter/cooking dish back to the kitchen. Never eat directly from the common pot (it is also unsanitary) and don't leave food in front of you. This is especially important at restaurants, where there is usually bread on the table. Ask for the bread to be removed.
- 8) Sip water between each bite. This will fill you up and slow down your eating.

Remember, it's not *what* you eat, but *how* you eat.

Further articles on exercise and types of food to eat will appear in the future.