

# Intuitive Eating

# What's in it for me? A fad-free guide to healthy eating.

From improved food labeling practices to advances in metabolic and nutritional science, we're better informed about healthy eating than ever before. And yet, our societies are in the midst of an obesity pandemic. What's gone wrong – why do we struggle so much when it comes to food? Paradoxically, one of the biggest problems often masquerades as the cure. That problem is dieting. It's not just that individual diets rarely work. They actually make the problem worse. Dieting damages our relationship with food. It prevents us from enjoying our meals, makes us neurotic, and often leads to weight gain. It's time to find an alternative. Let's fix our relationship to food and start eating intuitively. In these blinks, you'll learn

what rats can tell us about the biology of binge-eating; how toddlers eat and what we can learn from them; and why consuming foods you like is more effective than following restrictive diets.

## Dieting is counterproductive.

Balanced meals built around vegetables, legumes, and lean proteins. Moderate amounts of fats, sugar, and carbs. Regular exercise and occasional treats . . . In theory, eating healthily is pretty simple. In reality, it's anything but. And no wonder! Food and what it does to us are fraught, emotional topics. Think about being thin, for example. A slim figure is not just about health – we also associate it with moral and aesthetic concepts like self-control and beauty. We overeat when we're stressed or anxious. We punish overindulgence by denying ourselves “sinful” foods: the things we actually like eating. In short, we're pretty neurotic when it comes to nutrition. The whole diet industry is built on the recognition of this simple fact. Unfortunately, dieting usually only makes things worse. The key message here is: Dieting is counterproductive. Dieting is big business. In the United States, the industry is worth around \$60 billion annually. The number of commercials for diet-related products has doubled every year since the mid-'70s. Today, there are thousands of diets to choose from. Browse a bookstore and you'll find volumes that advocate eating like carnivorous cavemen or, on the other end of the spectrum, following the apostles of veganism. Both camps promise weight loss, health, and, ultimately, happiness. And that's not all: there are also people who promise that you'll achieve the same results by putting butter in your coffee, or reducing your daily fat intake to zero, or drinking grapefruit juice with every meal. But while the industry rakes in cash, people aren't getting slimmer. On the contrary, obesity rates are skyrocketing. More people are dieting than ever before, but the majority of Americans are overweight. So what's going on? Well, dieting actually appears to increase your risk of gaining weight. That's the conclusion a team of nutrition scientists at UCLA reached in 2007. They reviewed 31 long-term studies of the effects of dieting in adults, and the results were staggering. Sixty-six percent of people regained more weight than they'd lost. But perhaps these people were predisposed to weight gain? Nope – the researchers checked that. At the beginning of the studies, the dieters weighed the same as their non-dieting peers. So it wasn't genetics that made them overweight. Instead, it was dieting. If people took an asthma medication that improved their breathing for a few weeks but undermined their long-term health, we'd be crying foul. And yet, when it

comes to dieting, we blame ourselves and our lack of “willpower.” But it’s not us that’s wrong – it’s the product that stinks!

## **Dieting is food deprivation, and it creates a powerful rebound effect.**

Rats don’t get hung up on food. They don’t read magazines filled with cheesecake recipes, worry about reports linking fat consumption to early death, or feel guilty about getting out of shape. They do overeat, though. If you feed rats a palatable diet – imagine the rodent equivalents of delicious, high-calorie dishes we serve at holidays – they gain weight. No surprises there. Other mammals, like humans, do that too. But a closer look shows there’s more to rat nutrition. Scientists have deprived rats of food for a few days, and then offered the rodents all the snacks they could eat. Whiskered dieters gained a lot more weight than rats who’d been feeding normally. In other words, deprivation leads to overeating. We do that, too. When we’re denied food, we end up eating more. The key message here is: Dieting is food deprivation, and it has a powerful rebound effect. During the Second World War, Ancel Keys, an American scientist, conducted a study into how famine affects our bodies and minds. Keys selected 32 physically healthy and psychologically stable young men. For three months, they ate as they pleased. They averaged 3,500 calories a day and quickly gained weight. And then the feasting stopped. Kelly limited his subjects to just half of their original calorie intake. He likened this to semi-starvation. The physiological effects were stark. The men lost around 24 percent of their body weight, and their metabolism decreased by 40 percent. The psychological toll was just as pronounced. Kelly’s volunteers became apathetic, irritable, and depressed. Six months later, Kelly flicked the switch again. He told the men they were now free to eat as they pleased. What followed was a cycle of insatiable hunger, binge-eating, and, in some cases, bulimia – an eating disorder defined as losing control over what, and how much, you eat. It took the men five months to normalize their eating – which brings us to dieting, a form of semi-starvation with similar outcomes. Our bodies experience diets as famine – that is, as a threat to survival. They respond to this crisis by producing biochemicals that create near-irresistible urges to load up on calories when these next become available. The neurotransmitter neuropeptide Y, for example, is associated with the craving for carbohydrates, the gold-standard of food energy. When lapsed dieters binge on bread, cake, and cookies, it’s rarely a question of willpower – it’s neuropeptide Y screaming “I’m dying; feed me!” In a battle between our minds and our bodies, there’s usually only one winner: biology.

## **Your body knows what it needs better than diet planners.**

Let’s recap. Dieting, a kind of voluntary semi-starvation, runs up against the hard limits of our bodies’ biology. Famine leads to feasting, which is why serial dieters end up gaining weight. So what’s the alternative? It’s time to talk about intuitive eating. This concept rests on a simple yet profound premise: your body already knows how to eat healthily. All you need to do is remember how to listen to it. The key message here is: Your body knows what it needs better than diet planners. How do toddlers eat? In the early ’90s, Leann Birch, an American developmental psychologist, published a series of articles on this question. Her answer can be summed up in just one word: intuitively.

Given free access to food, toddlers consume varying amounts of calories from meal to meal and day to day. When they're ravenous, they eat a lot; if they're only peckish, they'll do with a small snack. But take a longer timeframe - say, a few weeks - and you'll see that the toddlers' calorie intake is remarkably stable. They have an intuitive and spontaneous way of satisfying shifting energy needs. Simply put, toddlers' bodies tell them how much to eat and when to do it. Adult bodies can also fine-tune their energy needs. Biologically speaking, there's no difference between how adults and toddlers eat. The problem arises when we start to constrain our eating in dietary straightjackets. Slowly but surely, we learn to ignore hunger. Or, rather, adults tune out all hunger except the extreme states which can't be ignored, like the painful pangs that follow periods of semi-starvation. This is how carb-loading binges start. So how do we get back to intuitive eating? Well, step one is honoring your hunger - listening to what your body is trying to tell you. Here's how you can start putting that idea into practice. Every time you eat something, grab pen and paper and rate your hunger on a scale of one to ten. When you're done with your meal or snack, repeat the process. Ask, How hungry am I now? Over time, you'll start to see patterns. How long do you wait between meals? Is there a relationship between how much and how often you eat? These are all things which can point you to what your body needs and when. Satisfy those needs, and you'll begin to avoid the anxious famine states that cause intense cravings and overeating.

## **Dieting is an unhealthy emotional roller-coaster.**

Food is emotional, and the labels we attach to it evoke strong feelings. "Slimming" foods are boring but virtuous. "Fatty" foods, on the other hand, are deliciously sinful. Indulgence warrants punishment: a moment on the lips, we're told, is a lifetime on the hips. Few of us are cut out for a life free from culinary sin, though. Trying to stick to the straight and narrow path doesn't lead to virtue - it traps us in a cycle of abstinence and guilty bingeing. The key message here is: Dieting is an unhealthy emotional roller-coaster. All diets have one thing in common: they're restrictive. In other words, they tell you what not to eat. Avoid these foods, they say, and you'll discover the path to slimness, health, and happiness. Scapegoats vary from diet to diet. Some claim it's carbs that are playing havoc with your waistline; others pin the blame on fats or sugar. Usually, though, diets tell us to ditch all the things we love. But here's something diets miss. Restricting foods you enjoy isn't just a matter of calories - it sends you on an emotional roller-coaster ride. At first, giving up cookies or pizza makes you feel virtuous. You're avoiding "bad" foods; you now have a guilt-free relationship with food. This is the first phase of a diet, but it doesn't last long. Slowly but surely, you begin to resent your deprivation. And then, one day, you snap - you can't bear another restrictive meal, let alone another whole day of restrictive eating! You remind yourself of how good you've been. Surely that's justification enough for a small treat? These thoughts make you feel bad, but not bad enough to stop right away. This is where the cycle starts. Day after day, you continue breaking dietary rules, and the guilt creeps in. Suddenly, you find yourself at another tipping point. This is the what-the-hell effect. You've already blown the diet, so what's the point of stopping now? As you return to eating "bad" foods, your sense of deprivation fades and is replaced by guilt. When this guilt becomes overwhelming, the cycle starts anew. You decide to return to the straight and narrow and restrict what you eat. That makes you feel virtuous - until the deprivation becomes unbearable and famine turns to feasting once again. How do you get off this emotional roller coaster? As we'll see in the next blink, the solution is to let go of deprivation

altogether.

## **Allowing yourself to eat “forbidden” foods makes them less compelling.**

Diets are wars. There are allies and enemies – the “good” foods which aid your struggle and the “bad” foods that undermine it. Defeats must be avenged: a cheeseburger today calls for heroic sacrifices tomorrow. Even when you’re winning this war, dieting is emotionally draining. And when you fail, it feels like you’ve lost more ground than you’d ever gained. This brings us to the second principle of intuitive eating – making peace with food. Rather than fighting your cravings, you need to work with them. To call this truce, give yourself unconditional permission to eat. The key message here is: Allowing yourself to eat “forbidden” foods makes them less compelling. Lots of diets are based on the idea that foods rich in calories, sugar, and fat are “addictive.” Once you start eating them, it’s claimed, you’ll have a hard time stopping. The result? Binge-eating and weight gain. So, then, the logical solution seems to be a ban on “forbidden” foods. It’s a neat theory, but it’s not backed up by scientific evidence. Take a major study published in 2011 in the journal *Eating Disorders*. It showed that when people with eating disorders were allowed to eat forbidden foods as part of their treatment, binge-eating decreased significantly. How does this work? Recall what we said about food deprivation. It leads to intense cravings, which in turn result in overeating. Ironically, if nobody’s limiting your intake of, say, chocolate cake, you’re less likely to binge on it. If it’s always there, you don’t need to gorge yourself during brief windows of opportunity. So how do you start making peace with food? Well, the first step is to list every food you find appealing. Then circle the foods that you’ve been restricting. Next, go and buy them in a supermarket or order them at a restaurant. As you’re eating them, check in with yourself: Do they actually taste as good as you imagined? And once you’re through with them, how do you feel? Happy? Indifferent? Perhaps queasy? If those foods taste and feel good, give yourself permission to continue eating them. That doesn’t mean eating as much as you like and whenever you want, though. Remember, intuitive eating is about becoming more attuned to your body’s needs. Peaches and chocolate cake may be emotionally equal choices, but that doesn’t mean they’re equal in all respects. However much you love chocolate cake, there will be times when you’re better off honoring your hunger with a peach.

## **Ignoring the food police makes for a healthier approach to eating.**

How does an apple stack up against a slice of apple pie? Well, both are sugar-rich, but raw apples are less caloric because they contain very little fat. Also, raw apples are a lot richer in dietary fiber. Such neutral observations help us make informed decisions about what and when we eat. Say it’s mid-afternoon and you’re meeting friends for a restaurant meal in three hours. Fresh fruit or pie? It’s an easy call. So far, so sensible. Why, then, do we have such a hard time making pragmatic everyday food decisions? Simple: we’ve moralized food so much that we’re struggling to think clearly! The key message here is: Ignoring the food police makes for a healthier approach to eating. When we talk about food, we often sound like fanatics of a religious cult. Meals can be “decadent” or “tempting.” Dieting “laws” are like commandments: thou shalt not eat



carbs. Worst of all, we make sweeping moral judgments. If we pick the salad option, we're "good." If we choose the pizza, we're "bad." Where do these ideas come from? Blame it on the food police – your internal bureau of dietary investigation that's memorized every food rule you've ever picked up. Its officers are always on the lookout for new violations. But here's the thing: you don't have to obey them. Food police's edicts are irrational. You'd be much better off replacing them with more considered thoughts. To do this, you first need to identify irrational thinking. Ask yourself, Am I having repetitive and intense feelings about some foods? If the answer is yes, challenge those feelings. And then ask follow-up questions. What is it about your thoughts that makes you feel this way? What are you saying to yourself? What's true about your food beliefs, and what's false? Once you've uncovered irrational thoughts, you can replace them with something more reasonable. Take a client who came to see Evelyn Tribole, one of the authors. This woman believed that if she had pizza for dinner, she'd wake up much fatter the following morning. This thought is irrational; our bodies just don't work that quickly. But the woman was feeling bigger. So what was going on? There's a logical and biologically correct explanation. Eating pizza – which is usually pretty salty – made the woman retain more water. In other words, she was temporarily bloated – not fat. Reframing the issue this way neutralized its moral sting. Having a pizza was no longer something reprehensible.

## **Eat mindfully and your body will tell you when it's full.**

When you learn to honor your hunger, the way you eat becomes more closely attuned to your body's needs. But that's just half the battle. You will also need to learn to stop eating when your body tells you it's full. Respecting fullness, or satiety, hinges on giving yourself unconditional permission to eat. Why is that? Well, you're unlikely to say you're full and leave food on your plate if you're concerned you won't get to eat that pizza, apple pie, or burger anytime soon! The key message here is: Eat mindfully and your body will tell you when it's full. Let's say you've given yourself permission to eat whatever you like. That's a great start. It means you've eliminated one of the most common causes of overeating. You're no longer at risk of bingeing in response to deprivation. But overeating can also be the product of inattention. Simply put, when you're not listening to your body, you usually eat more than you need to. That's where conscious eating comes in. Think of it as a kind of mindfulness. The aim here is to suspend judgment and observe yourself eating. Pay as much attention to detail as possible. Start by pausing in the middle of your meal or snack. You're not committing yourself to stop eating at this stage – you're just checking in with your body. Carry out a taste check. How does the food taste? Is it delicious? Are you enjoying it? Is it worthy of your taste buds? Or are you just eating it because it's there? Next, you'll carry out a satiety check. Rate your hunger and fullness levels. At first, you'll likely see this in black-and-white, hungry-or-full terms. With practice, however, you'll learn to identify the shades of gray between hunger and satisfaction. If you do decide to eat more, perform another satiety check when you're done. How full are you now? Did you achieve a comfortable level of satisfaction, or did you overshoot? This will help you find your last-bite threshold – the point at which you'll know that the food in your mouth is the last bite you're going to take. Learning this skill is not instant, but you'll get there. Remember, intuitive eating is about rediscovering something your body already knows – all you need to do is learn to listen to it.

# Final summary

The key message in these blinks is that: Dieting is presented as the silver bullet to all our problems. Lose weight, the dieting industry says, and you won't just be slimmer – you'll also become healthier and happier. In reality, dieting is often a recipe for misery. It ruins our relationships with food. We develop new hang-ups, feel guilty, and – ironically – end up putting on more weight than we'd lost. The good news is that there is an alternative: intuitive eating. This approach is all about attuning yourself to your body and replacing the artificial constraints set by restrictive diets with natural constraints set by your own biology. Actionable advice: Check-in with yourself periodically. We all know it's easy to fall back into old patterns. To avoid returning to deprivation under the guise of healthy eating, ask yourself some questions: Do you really like the taste of the new foods you've chosen, or are you being a health martyr? How does eating these foods make you feel? Do you like that feeling? Are you more energetic? Do you still trust yourself to have a non-healthy treat? Answer these questions honestly and you'll find it easier to pursue your new goals while remaining an intuitive eater.