

Once kids are born, we need to nurture them to develop their palates. This means letting them know that food that tastes good doesn't have to be overly sweet, overly fatty, or overly salty. We need to communicate that bitter means health. Cultures that believe bitter foods are healthful tend to eat bitter foods more readily simply because they think these foods signify health.

I believe that part of the reason that lower-income communities suffer more from obesity, hypertension, and diabetes is that they never learn to appreciate bitter tastes. Lower-income households tend to (on average) eat more processed foods. On average, processed foods contain far fewer bitter tastes than fresh. If you grow up in a household where bitter foods are not served, you'll never learn that vegetables can taste good.

If we want to improve the health of children in low-income communities (and all communities, for that matter), there's an easy class we could teach to give kids an appreciation for the flavor of some healthful foods. We could take a page from the supersour candy playbook and make tasting bitter foods a daring, laudable accomplishment. In other words: a game. Who can tolerate radicchio the best? Who makes the fewest faces when eating Brussels sprouts? And who actually likes the flavor of radishes? The more we teach kids that bitter foods are usually telling you that they're healthy, the more information we arm them with. And, of course, the more fun we can make it, the better the lesson will stick with them.

Out of Touch with Hunger

I challenge you to remember the last time you experienced really angry, gnawing hunger pangs that lasted for more than a few minutes. For most people in developed nations this is hard to do. The minute we feel the teensy itch of hunger we satisfy it. We spoil our hunger like a precious newborn, stuffing a metaphorical breast in its mouth each time it threatens to cry. As a result we've lost touch with hunger cues.

When we sit down to eat—or worse: stand or drive—we don't really know if we're eating because we're a little bit hungry, bored, or famished, or just because it's the time of the day when we normally eat. I wanted to see if the scientific community agreed with my perspective, so I called Patricia Pliner, a social psychologist at the University of Toronto. She studies why people eat what they eat as well as why they eat the quantity they do.

I asked her to give me her professional opinion. Does our ridiculously easy access to food from the time we wake up until the time we fall asleep play a bigger role than hunger in what and how much we eat?

"Absolutely. One hundred percent," she confirmed. "I think that—except under pretty extreme circumstances—the amount people eat is dictated by social norms and the presence of food to a much greater extent than by what you might call hunger or satiety. I think those two things are very unimportant in determining how much people eat."

Unimportant? Hunger and fullness are unimportant? We think we eat when we get hungry and stop eating when we're full. But here is someone who has conducted research on hunger, who tells us that this doesn't happen. Pliner then told me of an experiment she did that proved this fact.

First, she brought people into her lab and gave them a set amount of food: a bowl of chicken noodle soup, crackers, a turkey sandwich, and strawberry yogurt with fruit. Exactly 369 calories. Half of the people were fed this amount of food while they stood alone at a counter and ate it in one standing. This scenario was meant to mimic the way we snack. The researchers also primed these subjects with snack-y language. The other half of the participants were taken into a room where each was seated across from another subject at a dining table, while music played in the background. Their food was divided into three courses: a soup starter served with crackers, a sandwich entree, and a yogurt and fruit dessert. It was served on real plates with real silverware. Same caloric content: 369. This scenario was meant to mimic a formal meal setting. Later, when both groups were offered an unlimited amount of pasta, those who had eaten casually standing up ate more than those who had eaten in a more formal meal setting. Remember, both groups had eaten the same amount of food before being offered the pasta.

The takeaway: don't eat standing up! More seriously, the results show that simply changing the way you think about snacking can change the way you eat later. If you are really hungry and feel that you need to eat a substantial snack of, say, a handful of crackers, cheese, and some soup, sit down at a table, use plates and silverware, and convince yourself that this amount of food is a small meal. Then, when you sit down to eat your next meal, pass on the appetizers and soup, or maybe eat a smaller entree, because you've already ingested a small meal in the form of cheese, crackers, and soup. They count against the whole amount of calories you'll eat in a day. But instead of seeing the glass as half empty, consider it in the positive. If you do it right, you can treat yourself to more than three real meals a day! What a luxury. What indulgence!