

Improving Your Eating Habits

When it comes to eating, we have strong habits. Some are good ("I always eat breakfast"), and some are not so good ("I always clean my plate"). Although many of our eating habits were established during childhood, it doesn't mean it's too late to change them.



Making sudden, radical changes to eating habits such as eating nothing but cabbage soup, can lead to short term weight loss.

However, such radical changes are neither healthy nor a good

idea, and won't be successful in the long run. Permanently improving your eating habits requires a thoughtful approach in which you Reflect, Replace, and Reinforce.

- **REFLECT** on all of your specific eating habits, both bad and good; and, your common triggers for unhealthy eating.
- **REPLACE** your unhealthy eating habits with healthier ones.
- **REINFORCE** your new, healthier eating habits.

Reflect, Replace, Reinforce: A process for improving your eating habits

1. **Create a list of your eating habits.** Keeping a food diary for a few days, in which you write down everything you eat and the time of day you ate it, will help you uncover your habits. For example, you might discover that you always seek a sweet snack to get you through the mid-afternoon energy slump. Use [this diary](#) [PDF-36KB] to help. It's good to note how you were feeling when you decided to eat, especially if you were eating when not hungry. Were you tired? Stressed out?
2. **Highlight the habits** on your list that may be leading you to overeat. Common eating habits that can lead to weight gain are:

- Eating too fast
- Always cleaning your plate
- Eating when not hungry
- Eating while standing up (may lead to eating mindlessly or too quickly)
- Always eating dessert



- Skipping meals (or maybe just breakfast)
3. **Look at the unhealthy eating habits** you've highlighted. Be sure you've identified all the triggers that cause you to engage in those habits. Identify a few you'd like to work on improving first. Don't forget to pat yourself on the back for the things you're doing right. Maybe you almost always eat fruit for dessert, or you drink low-fat or fat-free milk. These are good habits! Recognizing your successes will help encourage you to make more changes.
 4. **Create a list of "cues"** by reviewing your food diary to become more aware of when and where you're "triggered" to eat for reasons other than hunger. Note how you are typically feeling at those times. Often an environmental "cue", or a particular emotional state, is what encourages eating for non-hunger reasons.

Common triggers for eating when not hungry are:

- Opening up the cabinet and seeing your favorite snack food.
- Sitting at home watching television.
- Before or after a stressful meeting or situation at work.
- Coming home after work and having no idea what's for dinner.
- Having someone offer you a dish they made "just for you!"
- Walking past a candy dish on the counter.
- Sitting in the break room beside the vending machine.
- Seeing a plate of doughnuts at the morning staff meeting.
- Swinging through your favorite drive-through every morning.
- Feeling bored or tired and thinking food might offer a pick-me-up.



5. **Circle the "cues" on your list that you face on a daily or weekly basis.** Going home for the Thanksgiving holiday may be a trigger for you to overeat, and eventually, you want to have a plan for as many eating cues as you can. But for now, focus on the ones you face more often.
6. **Ask yourself** these questions for each "cue" you've circled:

or ask yourself these questions for each cue you're on about:

- **Is there anything I can do to avoid the cue or situation?** This option works best for cues that don't involve others. For example, could you choose a different route to work to avoid stopping at a fast food restaurant on the way? Is there another place in the break room where you can sit so you're not next to the vending machine?
 - **For things I can't avoid, can I do something differently that would be healthier?** Obviously, you can't avoid all situations that trigger your unhealthy eating habits, like staff meetings at work. In these situations, evaluate your options. Could you suggest or bring healthier snacks or beverages? Could you offer to take notes to distract your attention? Could you sit farther away from the food so it won't be as easy to grab something? Could you plan ahead and eat a healthy snack before the meeting?
7. **Replace unhealthy habits with new, healthy ones.** For example, in reflecting upon your eating habits, you may realize that you eat too fast when you eat alone. So, make a commitment to share a lunch each week with a colleague, or have a neighbor over for dinner one night a week. Other strategies might include putting your fork down between bites or minimizing other distractions (i.e. watching the news during dinner) that might keep you from paying attention to how quickly – and how much – you're eating. Here are more ideas to help you replace unhealthy habits:
- Eat more slowly. If you eat too quickly, you may "clean your plate" instead of paying attention to whether your hunger is satisfied.
 - Eat only when you're truly hungry instead of when you are tired, anxious, or feeling an emotion besides hunger. If you find yourself eating when you are experiencing an emotion besides hunger, such as boredom or anxiety, try to find a non-eating activity to do instead. You may find a quick walk or phone call with a friend helps you feel better.
 - Plan meals ahead of time to ensure that you eat a healthy well-balanced meal.
8. **Reinforce your new, healthy habits and be patient with yourself.** Habits take time to develop. It doesn't happen overnight. When you do find yourself engaging in an unhealthy habit, stop as quickly as possible and ask yourself: Why do I do this? When did I start doing this? What changes do I need to make? Be careful not to berate yourself or think that one mistake "blows" a whole day's worth of healthy habits. You can do it! It just takes one day at a time!

Want to learn more?

Losing Weight

What is healthy weight loss and why should you bother?

Getting Started

Check out some steps you can take to begin!

Keeping the Weight Off

Losing weight is the first step. Once you've lost weight, you'll want to learn how to keep it off.

File Formats Help:

How do I view different file formats (PDF, DOC, PPT, MPEG) on this site?

(<http://www.cdc.gov/Other/plugins/>)

(<http://www.cdc.gov/Other/plugins/#pdf>)

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My Food Diary Day _____

Breakfast					
Snack					
Lunch					
Snack					
Dinner					

