

# Deciphering between emotional, physical hunger

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Being in tune with our body's natural hunger and fullness cues are the keys to healthy weight management.

Unfortunately, our signals for hunger can be triggered for a variety of reasons, including emotional hunger cues. The University of Alabama's Sheena Quizon Gregg offers four ways to tell the difference between emotional and physical hunger.

- Emotional hunger is sudden. One minute you're not thinking about [food](#) and the next minute you're starving from the sight of a co-worker bringing in a box of doughnuts. You feel the need to eat something in the next 30 to 40 seconds. Physical hunger is more gradual. You get steadily progressive cues to eat and can wait 30 to 40 minutes rather than seconds to consume a meal or snack.
- Emotional hunger is for a specific food. Your cravings are for a specific type of food such as chocolate, pizza or a cheeseburger. No other food will satisfy that craving or "hunger." Physical hunger is open to different foods. You may have food preferences, but you are open to alternative choices.
- Emotional hunger is usually paired with an upsetting emotion or event. With emotional hunger, we use food to sooth the [stressful situation](#). Physical hunger occurs out of physical need such as several hours passing since the last meal or snack.
- Emotional hunger is "above the neck." You start thinking about the craving in your mouth and mind throughout the day. Physical

hunger is more stomach based. Gnawing in the stomach, rumbling or stomach pain can indicate physical hunger.

Though it can be easy to confuse emotional and physical hunger cues at times, staying on a normalized schedule of eating can help train your body to be a more mindful eater. Resources like [eatright.org](https://eatright.org) and [intuitiveeating.com](https://intuitiveeating.com) can help you stay on track with your health goals.

Provided by University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa

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