

Eating mindfully through the holidays—and all year

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Slow down before plowing through the holiday hors d'oeuvres or

finishing off that overfilled plate of comfort food. An approach called mindful eating could just help you enjoy it even more and increase well-being.

Paying close attention to [food](#) and how it makes your body feel also can help you make better decisions about what, why and the amount to eat.

"Mindful eating starts before the meal," said registered dietitian Carrie Dennett. She suggests "checking in" with your body and pondering questions such as, "Am I hungry?" or "Why am I wanting to eat?"

Controlling portions and losing weight are not the goals, but they may be indirect outcomes of [mindful eating](#). It can help in selecting [nutritious foods](#) and recognizing when you've eaten enough to feel satisfied.

Consider which foods sound good. Something cool, crisp and refreshing? Or something warm and hearty?

Rather than eating on autopilot, take it slow during a meal. Focus and enjoy a food's smell, taste and texture.

"I mean really, really noticing your food," said Dennett, author of "Healthy for Your Life: A Holistic Approach to Optimal Wellness."

Mindful eating is rooted in the ancient Buddhist philosophy known as mindfulness, highlighting awareness of the "present moment, without judgment," said registered dietitian Dana Notte, of ThrivInspired Nutrition and a board member of The Center for Mindful Eating.

"This is about curiosity and experimentation," Notte said, adding that no food is off limits and there is no right or wrong.

When preparing to attend a food-filled holiday gathering, try to arrive

pleasantly hungry and ready to eat, but not ravenous. Otherwise, you may eat quickly and become overfull before your stomach has time to tell your brain you are satisfied, which can take 20 minutes, Dennett said.

If hors d'oeuvres are present, think about how to avoid filling up before the meal is served, she said.

At Thanksgiving, Dennett said, she forgoes more routine foods and opts instead for stuffing or special tasty foods she doesn't eat at other times of the year.

"I can have a dinner roll at any time," she said.

Whether it's a hearty wedge of pumpkin pie or a single sugar cookie, focus on each bite. Take time chewing and savoring.

"Slow down and tune in to that eating experience," Notte said, and remember it's OK if every meal is not perfectly balanced during the holidays.

It's not practical to eliminate all distractions when eating. Plus, during the holidays the point is to visit with family and friends. But pause occasionally to pay attention to your senses and whether you've had enough, Notte said.

Another holiday suggestion: Start with half as much food on a plate as you normally would. Then, later in the meal, check in with your body to see if you really want more.

If an event includes a spread of food on a buffet, stand away from that table when chatting with fellow partygoers to minimize the temptation to mindlessly eat.

"Eliminate that pull," Dennett said. "Why make it that much more challenging?"

If there's a holiday food you crave, it's all right to indulge. But recognize the difference between a true deep-seated craving and impulse eating, Dennett said.

Pressure from family or friends about food also may be part of the [holiday](#) experience. If so, Notte said, ask yourself, "What do I want? How do I want to feel?"

It may help to think in advance of possible responses that are sensitive to family members, such as, "It looks so good. I'm just so full."

When it comes to alcohol, make a conscious decision about whether and how much to drink.

Federal guidelines and the American Heart Association recommend that if you drink, do so moderately. That means one to two drinks per day for men and one drink for women.

Too much alcohol can make it more difficult to practice mindful eating, the dietitians said.

Although mindful eating has been steadily gaining popularity, and its simplicity is appealing, it's important to realize what it is—and is not, experts say.

"Mindful eating isn't a magic bullet for anything," Dennett said. "It's about choice."

Some scientific studies show mindful eating could impact [weight loss](#), but researchers say more study and testing is needed before it is used as a

tool for treating conditions such as obesity.

So, while it is not a weight loss intervention, Notte said, it has many benefits.

"Our bodies really crave balance when it comes to eating," she said.
"Mindful eating helps our body be where it wants to be naturally."

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