



## Dealing with Hunger and Food Cravings

*Eat Better and Manage Your Weight without Deprivation*

*-- By Sarah Haan, Registered Dietitian*

There's more to healthy eating and weight loss than simply [your food](#). How you think about food and respond to hunger, eating cues, and cravings also affect your diet and overall health.

As babies, we ate intuitively: We fussed when we were hungry and stopped eating when we were full. As we grew older, the world around us began influencing what, when and how much we chose to eat. After years of advertising, imposed meal times, cafeteria offerings, holiday meals, grandma's comfort foods, and yo-yo diets, many of us have completely lost touch with our real hunger and satiety signals. We confuse cravings with hunger and end up overeating—or emotionally eating—as a result.

But hunger and cravings are very different, and by learning to distinguish the two, you can be more satisfied with your meals and reduce your calories without feeling the urge to continue eating. Here's what you need to know to get back to your intuitive eating roots and manage your weight.

### Hunger: Your Need for Food

By definition, hunger is "the painful sensation or state of weakness caused by the need of food." Simply put, hunger is a signal from your body that it needs food for energy. When you're truly hungry, your stomach, brain, or both will give you cues to tell you to eat. Signals from your stomach may be growling, an empty, hollow feeling, or hunger pangs. Your brain may send signals such as a headache, trouble concentrating, irritability or fogginess. Some people even experience physical fatigue when they are hungry. Hunger does not go away over time—it only gets worse. And any food will satisfy your hunger and take the hunger signals away.

If you've fallen into the habit of ignoring hunger cues (eating when the clock says it's "lunch time" or eating when you are not even hungry), tune back in to your body. Keep a journal to track your hunger and satiety before and after eating. (You can also use the Nutrition Notes section on your [Tracker](#) to record these sensations.) When assessing your hunger level, use the following scale to rank how your body feels in terms of hunger or (also called satiety).

| Hunger Level | Sensations and Symptoms                                    |
|--------------|--|
| 1            | Starving, weak, dizzy                                      |
| 2            | Very hungry, cranky, low energy, a lot of stomach growling |

|           |   |
|-----------|---|
| <b>3</b>  | Pretty hungry, stomach is growling a little |
| <b>4</b>  | Starting to feel a little hungry            |
| <b>5</b>  | Satisfied, neither hungry nor full          |
| <b>6</b>  | A little full, pleasantly full              |
| <b>7</b>  | A little uncomfortable                      |
| <b>8</b>  | Feeling stuffed                             |
| <b>9</b>  | Very uncomfortable, stomach hurts           |
| <b>10</b> | So full you feel sick                       |

Once you begin paying attention to how you're feeling before and after you eat, you can start to make changes in what and how much you eat according to your hunger. It's best to eat when your hunger level is at a 3 or 4. Once you wait until you're at a 1 or 2 and are feeling very, very hungry, you are more likely to overeat or choose less healthful foods. (Remember: Any food will quell hunger, so we often reach for whatever is easy and convenient when we're feeling desperate to eat.) At a level 3 or 4, when you're just starting to feel some hunger signals, you can make a conscious decision to eat the right amount of healthful and tasty foods. It's important, too, to be aware of how much you eat. It's best to stop eating at level 6 before you feel uncomfortably full (7-10). Your brain registers the signals that you're full slowly, and learning to eat to satisfaction without overeating will take some attention and practice.

Another important strategy, as you become aware of your hunger signals, is to eliminate all distractions and make food the main attraction of your meal. Watching TV, reading, using the computer or paying bills while eating can reduce your ability to recognize satiety.

### **Appetite: Your Interest in Food**

We talk a lot about appetite: "My son has a huge appetite!" or "I worked up an appetite at the gym." Appetite is not the same thing as hunger; it actually refers to an interest in food. It's often said that someone's appetite can override their hunger and fullness. When some people feel stressed, they could lose their appetite and choose to ignore feelings of hunger. (Others respond the opposite way, eating in response to stress or negative emotions despite a lack of hunger or strong feelings of fullness.) And how many times have you sat down to a delicious meal and continued eating even though you were experiencing sensations of fullness? That, too, is an example of appetite overriding the signals from your body. As you start becoming more aware of hunger signals, do not confuse appetite with physical signs of hunger.

### **Cravings: Your Desire for Specific Foods**

Cravings are very different than hunger, yet somewhat similar to appetite. Look up "crave" in the dictionary and you will see "to long for; want greatly; desire eagerly." Usually, the foods you crave are not a necessity, nor do they serve a life-sustaining need. Cravings, unlike hunger signals, will change over time, even over a period of 10

minutes. They are usually triggered by emotions (stress, boredom, sadness, etc.), an attachment or fondness for a certain food, or proximity to appetizing food. Unlike hunger, where any food will quell the sensation, only one specific food will satisfy a craving.

Keep in mind that when you have a craving but are not physically hungry, you must look deeper into why that craving is there. Are you bored? Did you have a stressful day at home or work? Did doughnuts appear in the cafeteria and now all you can think about is eating one (a thought that previously hadn't even crossed your mind)? Dig into the reason behind your longing for a certain food. If it's an emotional need, [with the emotion](#). If it's a proximity craving (you see appetizing food and therefore want it), [a distraction technique](#).

Certainly, it's important to take pleasure from food and get satisfaction from the foods you eat. Cravings are normal and have a place in a healthy balanced diet. But learning to satisfy them in a controlled manner will keep your relationship with food in balance. Constantly giving in to your cravings—or confusing them with hunger—can lead to overeating and an unbalanced diet, especially since many of the foods we crave are high in fat, salt, sugar, or a combination of the three.

This makes it even more important to stop and examine why you want to eat something. Many healthy eaters have come up with [and crave-worthy recipes](#) that can satisfy their longings for a particular food without going overboard. Other times, you may simply choose to eat the food you're craving. Both situations are OK as long as you are making conscious decisions and practicing .

When you stop to think about your hunger and fullness levels, your appetite and cravings (both the triggers and your response), the more in-control you'll be around food, which can help you return to an intuitive way of eating that helps you manage your weight without ever going hungry or feeling deprived. Now that's a recipe for good health and weight-management!