



Behavioural Changes and Strategies for Eating Out, Holidays and Vacations

Changing Habits

Habits are automatic actions done without thinking, usually built by years of repetition. You brush your teeth in the morning. You shower and wash your hair. You get in the car and drive to work using the same route. You don't have to think about it. You never think to yourself "Am I going to brush my teeth tomorrow morning?" It's no different with snacks and mealtimes, which are just ingrained habits. There's nothing magically bad that happens when you miss a meal. Your body simply takes the calories it needs from your stores of body fat.

But you've probably heard the opposite for years, or even your whole life. Never skip a meal. Always eat breakfast, it's the most important meal of the day. Eat lots of healthy snacks. So you eat, and eat and eat, even to lose weight! This becomes an ingrained habit. You eat when you are hungry but you also eat when you are not hungry. So now when it gets time to eat, you get hungry. The problem is not you, the problem is your habits. So, you need to change those habits.

All habits feel impossible to break, but with the right strategies you can modify them in as little as two or three weeks. This is powerful knowledge, because it gives you a light at the end of the tunnel. Stick with habit change for a couple of weeks, and you'll be done. It's just like when you go from a dark room into the bright sunshine. You are blinded at first, but eventually you just get used to it. If you are accustomed to eating 3 times per day plus 3 snacks, then eating less than that will often feel very strange, but remember it only takes a few weeks to get used to the new routine. It takes effort at the beginning, but it gets easier day after day and you can make that process easier by doing something else when you are accustomed to eating.

Habits are conditioned responses made up of two main parts - the stimulus and the response. The stimulus is that particular situation that triggers the eating response – the habit. If you always eat popcorn at the movies, then the stimulus is the movie, which will make you want to eat popcorn. If you always eat in your car, then getting into your car is the stimulus that will make you want to eat. If you always eat at the kitchen table, then the stimulus is sitting at the kitchen table that will make you want to eat.

One potential solution is to remove the stimulus. If meal preparation is a strong stimulus for eating and you are the cook in the family and impossible to avoid the kitchen, then you can prepare meals several days in advance.

If it's not possible to remove the stimulus, then it's much easier to replace one habit with another habit rather than quitting cold turkey. When you relax to watch TV in the evening, replace the habit of snacking with the habit of drinking a premium cup of jasmine green tea, or herbal tea such as mint or chamomile.

If the stimulus is the lunch-time break, then on your fasting days, plan things to do so you are away from the kitchen or meal area.

- Go for a walk or do errands on your lunch break
- Do some light exercise, or yoga
- Organize your desk

Once you break the stimulus-response pairing for a few weeks, that habit begins to weaken. Suppose the stimulus is waking up, and the response is breakfast. After a few weeks of skipping breakfast, you'll find that your hunger begins to weaken. The habit is beginning to fade. The same happens with lunch and dinner, too.

Stress Eating

Our best intentions often get thrown out the window when we get stressed. We often seek out comfort foods, which are usually highly processed foods full of refined sugars and starches. There's a good reason for this. These processed foods light up the reward pathways of our brain, providing some momentary comfort from whatever is bothering us. You bury your sorrows in cake, not grilled salmon.

The key is to recognize that the food will not provide any lasting relief from stress and change that habit of eating to something more constructive. Here are some strategies to try the next time you feel the need to unwind:

1. Go outside. Being in nature is very calming and rejuvenating
2. Walk. Take a long stroll somewhere
3. Take five deep breaths. Breathe in through your nose for four seconds, hold your breath for seven seconds, then exhale slowly through your mouth for eight seconds
4. Write down your frustrations in a journal
5. Take an Epsom salt bath with some essential oils, such as lavender oil or my personal favorite, eucalyptus

6. Download mindfulness meditation apps and follow one of their guided sessions for a few minutes

Eating Out

Life is about balance, not fasting all the time and not eating all the time either. Eating out with friends and family is one of life's treasured experiences. There's no reason to avoid it. Just follow some of these simple guidelines to help you succeed when you eat out. Most restaurants offer good low carbohydrate choices. Here are our top 3 tips for eating out at restaurants:

1. **Say No to Bread** - If restaurants automatically bring bread at the beginning of your meal, simply ask the waiter to take it away. For main dishes that contain bread, buns or wraps, ask them to substitute with lettuce. A bun-less, lettuce wrapped burger is great if you're out and need to grab something on the go!
2. **Replace the starchy sides** - Ask to change the potatoes, rice or pasta side dishes to vegetables or a side salad.
3. **Order cheese or charcuterie for dessert** - Eating dessert is clearly not helpful if you are trying to lose weight. But if others are enjoying it, there's no need to be a party pooper. Order a cheese plate with nuts to savor.

Holidays

It's not a good idea to break your fast at a big holiday celebration because you will be overly tempted by the many sugary holiday treats. Break your fast at home at least a few hours before the party with some satiating foods full of proteins and healthy fats.

Bringing some foods like a veggie platter, meat and cheese tray, a side dish, such as brussels sprouts and bacon, or a dessert such as dark chocolate can ensure you have some good food choices as well as being a good guest. If you cannot avoid grains or starches, then eat them last. Fill up on the good fat, protein and fibre before the potatoes, rice or pasta. Incorporate vinegar into your meals to slow down the digestion of carbohydrates and reduce the blood sugar spikes and insulin surges. Sprinkle some cinnamon in your tea or coffee while you have a bit of dessert, which can help moderate your blood sugar levels.

Avoid snacking during these holiday feasts. Set two or three, 60-minute eating windows during the holiday party to limit the amount of snacking that you might do.

Vacations

It's relatively easy to avoid over-eating on vacations where you are busy sight-seeing and moving all day. It's likely that you won't have time to constantly snack. At night, the exorbitant prices of the mini-bar snacks is enough to discourage you.

One strategy that works for me is to skip breakfast during vacations, because I'm already used to it at home. I save time because I don't have to find a place for breakfast, and it saves money. I just go grab a coffee and go enjoy the destination. I plan on savoring the local specialties at lunch and dinner, but still having a 16-hour fast on most days. I may still gain a little weight, but nothing that can't be remedied with a longer fast or two when I get home.

The relaxing, resort or cruise vacation is more problematic. There is a lot more laying on the beach or by the pool with servers offering you sugary beverages and snacks. There's no easy way to avoid the temptation. Try eating two or three meals until you are full and have vacation treats with your meal. Avoid sugary beverages, and try to stick to water between meals. Swap out the sweet cocktails and beer for dry wine, champagne and spirits mixed with soda or seltzer water with a splash of lemon or lime.

Even with all this, vacation weight gain may still be unavoidable. But don't worry. You can always plan a few extra fasts when you return.