



## ‘Mindless eating’ leads to weight gain

**I try to eat healthfully and normally do well during the day, but in the evening when I’m watching TV, I snack way too much, even though I’m not really hungry. Any ideas?**

What you’re doing is so common that it has a name: “mindless eating.” Researchers, especially Brian Wansink at Cornell University, have explored this concept and have found that when Americans eat, we tend to rely not on internal cues, such as how hungry we are, but on other factors. And that leads to overeating.

One of those factors is eating while distracted — when watching TV, talking with family or friends, or eating in the car. When our attention is diverted from what we’re eating, we simply tend to eat and eat and eat — often not even really enjoying the food or the experience of eating it. Research at Yale University shows that viewing television food ads, especially those for unhealthy food, also triggers more food consumption.

Another external factor influencing how much we eat is serving size: If a larger serving is in front of us, we tend to eat more no matter what. Convenience and visibility of a food is another factor — if it’s easy to reach out and grab a food, we’ll be more likely to eat it. Even the way a room is lighted can cause us to eat more: Dim, soft lighting encourages us to prolong the eating experience and we eat more. Still other factors include stress, boredom or emotional reasons

for eating.

The kicker? None of this has anything at all to do with how hungry we are.

So, how do you counteract these subconscious influences on eating? That’s a whole other line of study, called “intuitive eating.” Intuitive eating rejects restrictive approaches of dieting. It avoids the idea of “taboo” foods and encourages us to increase our awareness of what our body is telling us related to hunger, cravings and eating behavior. The idea is to actually pay attention whenever you’re eating, pausing to determine your level of hunger versus your feeling of fullness. The idea is to start eating when hungry, no matter what time it is or if others around you are eating or not, and to stop eating when full, no matter if there is more food at hand. Imagine a scale where 1 is starving and 10 is stuffed: Go ahead and eat when you feel like you’re at a 3 or 4 on the scale; stop when you’re at a 6 or 7. It requires thought and self-awareness, but prevents cycles of starving and bingeing, and also helps prevent emotional eating.

The concept of intuitive eating also lets people eat whatever food they want, as long as they pay attention to hunger/fullness cues. Research shows that such permission also reduces binge eating and is associated with a lower body-mass index.

*Chow Line is a service of Ohio State University Extension and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. Send questions to Chow Line, c/o Martha Filipic, 2021 Coffey Road, Columbus, OH, 43210-1044, or [filipic.3@osu.edu](mailto:filipic.3@osu.edu).*



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