

Eat Happy!

Forget the Rules and Have More Fun

By Katja Rowell, MD

How much do you think about what's "right" to eat and the "best" weight or size to be? Here's how to free your mind, enjoy food, and be happier and healthier, too.

When 14-year-old Lucy (not her real name) came to my office complaining of dizziness, she and her mother were worried something was seriously wrong. Well, it was. Lucy had heard in health class that watching calories and eating low-fat foods would help her lose weight, so she skipped breakfast, traded milk for diet soda, and nibbled on salads at lunch. She wasn't losing weight, she had low iron (so her blood didn't carry oxygen well and contributed to her dizziness), she thought a lot about food, and she felt horrible.

Healthy eating helps you feel good, have energy, and have a strong body and mind. But there's a lot of confusing talk about "healthy" eating these days—in the media and from friends or even adults in your life. All the "shoulds" and "shouldn'ts" you hear about things like sugar, calories, protein, veggies, and more can be confusing. It can make you feel bad about food and your body, like when someone says, "I was so bad—I had dessert."

Here's another way to think about all of this. Did you know that how you think and feel about food affects your health? No research has ever shown that feeling bad about food makes you healthier, but research does show that it can make you less healthy. Feeling good about food can actually make you healthier—and happier.

Consider these research findings:

- Words can confuse things. When a food is labeled "healthy" or "low-fat," people tend to eat more of it, and more food the rest of the day. They might think, "I was 'good,' so I can eat more."
- Taste matters. Women were asked to eat a tasty meal, and then to drink a blended up version of the same meal. Even though the food and nutrients were the same, their bodies took in far less iron from the less tasty, blended version!
- Stress decreases how many nutrients (like iron) get into the body. So if you feel bad about what you're eating, nutrients aren't helping your body as much as they can.



Let Your Body Guide You

When we don't eat when we are hungry or eat less than we are hungry for, we then tend to eat more or less than we need. Our bodies are better than our brains at figuring out how to eat. A study on toddlers showed that when they got to choose what and how much to eat from a variety of foods over several days, they naturally chose foods that gave them good nutrition. Their bodies knew what they needed.

These days, we can choose from an amazing variety of foods, everything from asparagus to ziti. My mother didn't even get to taste an orange until she was 8 years old! Try to set aside the "supposed to" messages and consider what is simply delicious. You may find that sometimes you really want fresh snow peas or a clementine—because they taste good, not because someone tells you to eat it. And sometimes what sounds good is buttered popcorn or a piece of pie, and that's okay, too. Whatever you eat, appreciate each delightful bite.

Here are some ways to fuel a healthy body and feel good about food:

- Try to sit down to eat about every three to four hours. That's usually three meals and one snack a day. Eat until you aren't hungry anymore. Sometimes that may be more food; sometimes less.
- Make time for breakfast—your body and brain will reward you with morning energy! If you're in a rush, grab a milk box and sandwich or a slice of last night's pizza. There are no rules about "breakfast" food.

Aim for
balance—enjoy
foods from
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groups.



Toss Those Weight-y Thoughts

Many people who are bigger than average are fit and healthy, and many people who are “normal” weight are not healthy.

Most girls add weight before they grow taller during puberty. It’s normal for your body to change, and it will keep changing for a while. Trying to make your body look a certain way is almost guaranteed to fail and often leads to unhealthy habits.

Did you know that when girls feel badly about themselves and their bodies, they tend to be less active and become less healthy? Negative talk about weight can make girls feel defeated.

Exercise “shoulds” can also make lots of girls feel pressured to do the “right” amount of exercise. Your body will benefit far more when you find a form of physical activity that you enjoy, whether it’s a nature hike or jumping rope with friends. Whatever you do, set aside some moving-around time to make your body happier and healthier.

- Try new foods when you’re at a restaurant or cook it with your family. How about a cuisine that’s new to you such as Indian or Japanese?
- Eat meals with your family if you can. Girls who eat with their families at least four times a week get better nutrition and tend to be healthier and happier. Eating with just one loving adult makes anything a family meal, whether it’s home-cooked or take-out.
- Enjoy all kinds of foods: vegetables, ice cream, chicken, fruit, beans, and homemade cookies.
- Try cooking or growing food. Kids (and adults!) enjoy food more and try more unfamiliar foods if they have a hand in creating a dish. Ask a parent or other experienced cook to teach you or just dive in (with parental permission) to a recipe that sounds delicious.
- Aim for balance—enjoy foods from different food groups. Listen to what your body says. If you only eat fried foods at lunch, your stomach might feel uncomfortable and you might feel sluggish. If you skip fruits and vegetables all day, you can miss out on key nutrients, and you may have trouble going to the bathroom. (Gross, I know!)

What are some things that make it harder to eat well?

- Eating off and on all day long, sometimes called “grazing.” This often results in mindlessly eating whatever’s close at hand.
- Making a habit of eating when upset or stressed or distracted, such as watching TV or arguing with a parent about going to the movies on a school night.
- Skipping meals or eating less than you are hungry for. That usually means that you end up eating more in the long run. Studies show that when teens diet, they tend to weigh more and are at a higher risk for an eating disorder.
- Feeling bad about eating.

So the next time you read a food wrapper that says “healthy” or a friend tells you it is “bad” to eat sugar or fat, stop and think for a minute. Question what you hear, and listen to your body to help give you the answers. Enjoy eating happy!

Katja Rowell, M.D. is a family doctor, childhood feeding expert, and author who helps children and adults learn to eat well and take care of their bodies. She has a special interest in helping adopting and fostering families rear happy and healthy children.



“Fat” Can Be Healthy

As a girl, Ragen Chastain enjoyed moving: dancing, cheerleading, and doing varsity sports. Now she’s a fat activist and still dancing—she has won three national dance championships so far. Author of *Fat: The Owner’s Manual—Navigating a Thin-Obsessed World with Your Health, Happiness and Sense of Humor Intact*, Ragen believes that every body can be healthy and happy!