

In Praise of Plenty

Why bother with deprivation-based diets? When you choose the right foods, you can eat abundantly - and still achieve a healthy weight.



Step 1 - Prioritize Plants

Step 2 - Seek Hormonal Balance

Step 3 - Enjoy Variety

Step 4 - Adopt a Traditional Diet

Step 5 - Eat Mindfully

How to Eat Mindfully

Sometime in the past 50 years, Americans stopped thinking of food as part of a nourishing and pleasurable experience and began seeing it as something to be feared and restricted. Just browse through any diet book published since the 1950s and most of what you'll find is advice on avoiding certain foods. Trouble is, nothing triggers food cravings more than deprivation, says Kathie Swift, MS, RD, nutrition director at The UltraWellness Center in Lennox, Mass., and one of many experts helping people rediscover the joy in eating — and eating abundantly.

Given that two-thirds of Americans are overweight, you might wonder: Aren't we already eating a little too abundantly? Hardly, says food activist Anna Lappé, coauthor of *Grub: Ideas for an Urban Organic Kitchen* (Penguin, 2006), who describes our view of food as the "illusion of abundance." Supermarkets offer as many as 40,000 different food items, she notes, but most of them are nutritionally bereft and only leave us craving more.

Eating abundantly means rethinking what you can't eat and focusing instead on the foods your body craves at the deepest level. It also means listening to your body's signals — and recognizing the difference between feeling satisfied and feeling stuffed.

Although experts may disagree on exactly how to satisfy hunger — whether it's about volume, protein, flavor, fat or nutritional density — they all agree that true satisfaction includes the feeling of well-being that comes from nourishing the body, not just stuffing ourselves silly.

Ready to experience true abundance? Follow this five-step guide.

Step 1 - Prioritize Plants

For 50 years, nutrition researchers have sung a refreshingly simple chorus: Eat more plants. Fruits and vegetables are high in water and fiber (a.k.a. bulk), so they literally fill up the stomach, which then sends satiety signals to the brain. These signals are tripped by a food's volume and its weight, says Barbara Rolls, PhD, a professor of nutritional sciences at Pennsylvania State University and author of *The Volumetrics Eating Plan: Techniques and Recipes for Feeling Full on Fewer Calories* (HarperCollins, 2005). High-volume foods satisfy the brain. "People don't respond well to a half-empty plate," says Rolls. "If you just try to eat less, your brain is going to see the smaller portion and feel deprived."

Plant foods also help regulate weight by delivering a full slate of nutrients, the actions and full purpose of which science has yet to fully comprehend. We do know that receptors in the digestive tract carefully track, analyze and record both the caloric value and nutrient content of food passing through. These receptors are hardwired to the part of the brain that controls appetite. Once they've registered an appropriate number of nutrients, they signal the brain to turn off the appetite switch.

"Informational molecules in foods influence the gut's satiety signals in ways we've barely begun to understand," says Swift. "But we know that whole foods send satisfying signals to the gut and brain that help us keep a healthy body weight."

A plant-based diet doesn't mean a lifetime of rabbit food. The body also needs fat to run at its peak. Most nutritionists recommend that you get 15 to 25 percent of your daily calories from monosaturated (a.k.a. good) fats found abundantly in nuts, seeds and fish. Nutrition researcher Sally Fallon, coauthor of *Eat Fat, Lose Fat* (Penguin, 2005), goes a step further, encouraging people to eat liberal amounts of the saturated fats found in such foods as butter, cream and virgin coconut oil because, she asserts, saturated fats are necessary to keep the body's brain and nerve cells operating properly.

Deprive the body of adequate fats and it will go into conservation mode, she says. Include them and your body's energy metabolism will respond more generously. "If your body is left feeling as though food is abundant," she explains, "it won't hunker down and cling to every calorie as though it's its last."

The same principle is in play psychologically, say many nutritional experts, which is why occasionally indulging in moderate servings of your favorite "splurge" foods is generally deemed a good idea. "No nutritionist is going to get upset about a 3-ounce steak or a candy bar once in a while," says New York University nutrition professor Marion Nestle, PhD, MPH, author of *What to Eat: An Aisle-by-Aisle Guide to Savvy Food Choices and Good Eating* (North Point Press, 2006). "It's a matter of quantity."

Step 2 - Seek Hormonal Balance

According to some experts, obesity is caused by too much insulin in the bloodstream, which effectively puts satiety out of reach. A hormone that controls how the body stores fat,

insulin relegates calories to be either socked away as fat or burned as fuel. The problem is that when people gain weight, not only do they get bigger (and so increase their fuel requirements), but their insulin shoves calories into fat stores instead of allowing them to be used as fuel, explains Gary Taubes, author of *Good Calories, Bad Calories* (Knopf, 2007). “We’re hungry all the time because the body is always trying to store fuel rather than burn it.” Obesity doesn’t arise from a lack of willpower, says Taubes. It’s more likely a hormonal disruption caused by eating too many refined carbohydrates.

The amount of insulin buzzing through the body is directly tied to the quality and quantity of carbohydrates you eat. Complex carbohydrates, like those found in vegetables, legumes and whole grains, produce a slow, steady release of insulin. Foods high in refined carbohydrates, like sugar and white flour, cause insulin levels to spike. The higher the insulin levels, the more fat accumulates, no matter how much or how little you eat.

Worse still, from a satiety standpoint, a diet high in refined carbohydrates actually prevents feelings of satisfaction, trapping us in a constant state of hunger and craving. So what’s Taubes’s advice? Break the vicious cycle by decreasing the amount of insulin in your bloodstream.

“Ditch the sugar, flour, beer and other quickly digested carbohydrates,” Taubes suggests — not to cut calories or carbs, per se, but to put your hormones back on track. You can still eat abundantly, says Taubes, and as long as your meals aren’t built around these starchy, sugary ingredients. Without all those insulin-provoking carbs triggering your appetite, you’re likely to feel more satisfied with less food.

Step 3 - Enjoy Variety

Anyone who has tried and failed to stay on a single-food diet (think cabbage or grapefruit) knows that eating the same thing day in and day out is tedious and intensifies cravings for other foods. Even if you haven’t been on such an extreme diet, you’ve probably dug into a large serving of a single food, say pasta, and found that your eating pleasure slowly declines as you plow through the dish. You feel stuffed, but as soon as dessert hits the table, your taste buds reawaken and your stomach makes room for a little sweet indulgence.

Why? Because we crave different tastes — an evolutionary holdover from the days when we had to search high and low for the right mixture of nutrients to satisfy the body. The taste system steers people toward nutrients the body needs, says Dana Small, PhD, a researcher at the Yale University School of Medicine. “Sweet, salty and savory perceptions evolved so that we can identify specific nutrients, each of which has a physiological consequence for the body. These taste perceptions exist to identify nutrients.”

Rolls suggests stocking your kitchen with a variety of healthy foods that will satisfy any taste craving, such as sweet fruit, salty olives, tangy yogurt and bitter greens. Eating a wide variety of different vegetables, fruits and legumes will naturally help satisfy both your taste buds and the unmet nutritional needs that might otherwise keep your body constantly craving more.

Step 4 - Adopt a Traditional Diet

Until just a couple of generations ago, virtually everyone subsisted on a diet of whole foods — and most managed to experience satisfaction without putting on a lot of extra weight. Your great-grandmother’s approach to eating probably didn’t involve a lot of reduced-fat or

low-cal diet foods, nor did it include a lot of drive-thru fare or processed snacks. We'd all be better off, say nutritional experts, if we ate like that today.

“Confounding factors aside, people who eat according to the rules of a traditional food culture are generally much healthier than people eating a contemporary Western diet,” notes Michael Pollan in his 2008 bestseller *In Defense of Food: An Eater’s Manifesto* (Penguin, 2008).

Lappé experienced the joys of a traditional diet firsthand while living in Paris in her mid-20s. Although she ate as much as she pleased, often filling up on fresh fruits and veggies she bought daily at an open-air market, she lost 10 to 15 pounds, reaching what she now considers her body’s “optimal weight.” Her weight-loss experience was “the antithesis of sacrifice,” she says, because she also ate so many buttery croissants, rich cheeses and creamy full-fat yogurts. “But the rich foods were so satisfying, I was happy with a small portion,” she recalls. “For the first time, I started hearing the messages my body was sending me about satiety.”

Step 5 - Eat Mindfully

To enjoy food in abundance, one needs to tune in to the body enough to actually receive the satiety signals it’s sending, says Swift. (Get some mindful-eating tips below.) Unfortunately, when it comes to accurately tracking their own appetites, many Americans are tone deaf.

Recent research at Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y., published in the journal *Obesity*, measured how two groups of college students — one American and one French — decided when to stop eating. The French students, who weighed on average 20 pounds less than their American peers, were more likely to use internal cues — they put down their forks when they started to feel full. Americans, on the other hand, relied on external cues: They stopped consuming when they finished drinking a beverage or when the television show they were watching was over.

“Eating mindfully isn’t easy because our lives are full-throttle,” says Swift, but that doesn’t mean it’s impossible. It does mean we may need to actively embrace the art of conscious eating. Essentially, that’s the practice of tasting, sensing and perceiving every aspect of the eating process — from the moment we notice our desire to eat to the moment we push away from the table.

Swift thinks that carefully parsing our physiological, mental and emotional responses to our food in this way is well worth the effort: “When food becomes an aesthetic experience, the brain and gut align and the body feels more nourished.” And a profound sense of nourishment, she adds, is what eating with abundance is all about.

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How to Eat Mindfully

Eating abundantly involves tuning in to your body’s hunger and satiety signals by tuning out distractions, such as eating while driving, watching television or reading the paper. “When you’re distracted, you end up eating more,” says Brian Wansink, PhD, author of

Mindless Eating: Why We Eat More Than We Think (Bantam Dell, 2006). Here are ways to bring mindfulness to your meals:

Start with a blessing or intention. Simply getting conscious about the fact that you are eating with the intent to enjoy the meal and nourish your body gives your brain and biochemistry a chance to ready themselves — and it gives you a chance to become fully present for the rest of your mindful-eating experience.

Sharpen satiety signals. Before and a few times during each meal, ask yourself, “On a scale of 1 to 10, how hungry am I?” See if you can stop eating when you feel satisfied, not stuffed.

Tune in to your senses. Really look at and smell your food before you taste it, strive to fully experience each bite, and track the sensations as your satisfaction rises and then plateaus — a sign that your hunger is subsiding and your body is signaling “enough.”

Slow down. Put your fork and knife down between bites, and chew each bit of food a little longer. Slender people chew their food 30 percent more than overweight people, according to Wansink’s latest research. “They get more flavor and, therefore, more pleasure from less food.”

Be aware of other people’s influence. “We tend to mimic the speed at which [our tablemates] eat, as well as how much they eat,” explains Wansink. His tip? When eating in a group, be the last person to start eating and then pace yourself with the slowest eater at the table.