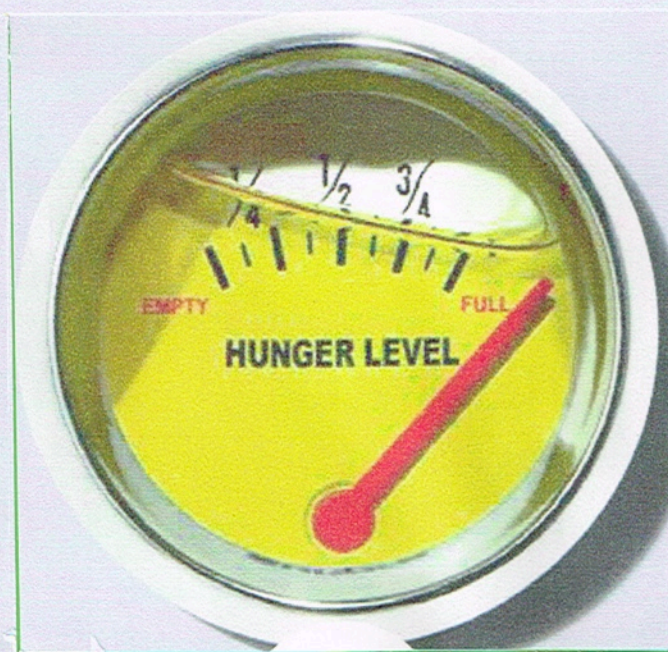




**THE EXPERT**  
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## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

# Does intuitive eating really work?

It's the phrase on everyone's lips – when they're not chowing down. But is eating what you want when you want it a recipe for wellbeing or a slippery slope?

**T**hose of a Monica Geller-esque nature will argue that well-placed rules make life more fun, but more and more people are shrugging off healthy-eating statutes and choosing to, well, go with the flow. Intuitive eating is based on 10 mindset-changing principles, including 'rejecting the diet mentality', 'honouring hunger' and 'making peace with food'. It's related to mindful eating, which encourages you to increase your awareness of real versus emotional hunger.

Both share the aim of using your body's in-built regulatory systems (feelings of hunger and fullness) to help you decide what, how much and when to eat, rather than following a diet plan.

It sounds like a sensible way to cut through the nutrition noise. Yet, decades of research have helped us identify the healthiest food choices – should you really ignore the science and just eat what your body tells you it needs? And what if it turns out it 'needs' millefeuille for breakfast?

Well, in reality, it probably won't. Research suggests that restriction-free eating doesn't necessarily lead to overeating or poor dietary choices. This is

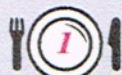
thanks to a process known as habituation, the idea that the more you're exposed to certain foods, the less inviting they become. Plus, being able to discern genuine hunger from the emotional kind means you can make a choice to adopt non-food-related coping strategies, which are arguably more effective in the long term.

In the 1990s, psychologist Jean Kristeller found a six-week mindful eating programme was effective in reducing binge-eating in overweight women. Since then, various studies have confirmed that mindful eating practices can reduce emotional eating and regulate portion size in adults of all weights.

Studies of intuitive eating show similar results – less emotional eating and improved body appreciation and self-esteem. Last year, in a review of 68 studies looking at intuitive or mindful eating, researchers found evidence that it led to a reduction in problematic eating behaviours, with a positive shift in food habits and portion sizes in some cases\*.

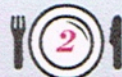
While the results look good for improving eating behaviours, the outcomes for weight loss are less clear cut. Intuitive eaters tend to have lower BMI scores than those who rely on calorie counting or external cues (like the clock) to decide when and how much to eat, but studies that looked at intuitive or mindful eating for weight loss show varying results. In one six-week study pitting intuitive eating against calorie restriction, the calorie-counters lost significantly more weight

## HOW TO EAT INTUITIVELY



### BECOME A HUNGER DETECTIVE

Before and after eating, make a note of your hunger and fullness level on a scale of one to 10 (one = empty, 10 = stuffed). Ideally, you'll start eating at three and stop at seven.



### AVOID DISTRACTIONS

Combining eating with other activities means you risk missing the subtle signals of fullness, so make at least one meal a day distraction-free. Food losing its taste or appeal is a reliable sign that you've had enough.



### SLOW DOWN

Shovelling it down like you haven't eaten for days is a signal you've let yourself get too hungry. Put down your fork between bites, chew your food and remember to breathe.

– although it's worth bearing in mind that longer-term studies have shown better outcomes for intuitive eating.

So, should you eat intuitively? Yes, if you're looking for a way of eating that frees you from the tyranny of chronic dieting and restriction. If weight loss is your goal, gentle education around energy balance (what you're putting in versus what you're burning) is useful, too, but tuning into and honouring your body's hunger and satiety is ultimately the route to a more relaxed relationship with food.