

Nutrition in Eating Disorders

Information and Guidelines for
People with Anorexia Nervosa and
Bulimia Nervosa

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Introduction

Normal, healthy eating is very important in your recovery from an eating disorder. Even though the underlying or “real” problems may have very little to do with food, the eating behaviour is what most people are anxious about at first. Everyone with anorexia nervosa or bulimia nervosa has concerns and difficulties with food, eating, and usually weight. Most eating disorders start with a diet, and within a few months or years you can be stuck in a cycle of disordered eating and psychological distress. It’s as if all the negative thoughts and feelings you may have about yourself somehow become focused on food.

Full recovery involves dealing with these underlying thoughts and feelings. However, the first step is to look at your difficulties with food and eating. If your body is not nourished properly, there is a profound effect on your body systems and how you think, feel, and act. If you are spending a lot of time thinking or obsessing about food and weight, there is little time and energy to deal with and enjoy daily living. Your body requires a normal amount of healthy food each day to function properly and to maintain your weight at a healthy level.

This booklet was written for people who are trying to recover from an eating disorder, either anorexia nervosa or bulimia nervosa. It addresses many of the nutrition topics which are of concern: healthy eating, weight, meal planning, bingeing, purging, and how to change your eating. This booklet is meant to be used along with counselling from a dietitian who has knowledge and experience in treating eating disorders. If you have any questions or concerns about any of the information presented, ask your dietitian.

What is normal eating?

Normal eating is going to the table hungry and eating until you are satisfied. It is being able to choose food you like and eat it and truly get enough of it - not just stop eating because you think you should. Normal eating is being able to give some thought to your food selection so you get nutritious food, but not being so wary and restrictive that you miss out on enjoyable food. Normal eating is giving yourself permission to eat sometimes because you are happy, sad, or bored, or just because it feels good. Normal eating is mostly three meals a day, or four or five, or it can be choosing to munch along the way. It is leaving some cookies on the plate because you know you can have some again tomorrow, or it is eating more now because they taste so wonderful. Normal eating is overeating at times, feeling stuffed and uncomfortable. And it can be undereating at times and wishing you had more. Normal eating is trusting your body to make up for your mistakes in eating. Normal eating takes up some of your time and attention, but keeps its place as only one important area of your life.

In short, normal eating is flexible. It varies in response to your hunger, your schedule, your proximity to food, and your feelings.

*For more about eating competence (and for research backing up this advice), see Ellyn Satter's *Secrets of Feeding a Healthy Family: How to Eat, How to Raise Good Eaters, How to Cook*, Kelcy Press, 2008. Also see www.EllynSatterInstitute.org/store to purchase books and to review other resources.*

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<http://ellynsatterinstitute.org/hte/whatisnormaleating.php>

How's your nutrition knowledge?

Most people with eating disorders know a lot about food. Many have spent hours reading books and articles on nutrition. Unfortunately, this knowledge is often unbalanced and contributes to keeping the eating disorder going. It can be important to explore your knowledge and understanding about food and nutrition and to correct any misinformation you may have learned over the years.

Try the following quiz:

True or false:

- _____ 1. Carbohydrates are the main source of energy in a normal diet.
- _____ 2. Vegetarianism is the healthiest way to eat.
- _____ 3. Fat intake should be as low as possible.
- _____ 4. Milk and milk products are necessary for healthy bones.
- _____ 5. Meat is the best source of iron.
- _____ 6. The best way to get enough vitamins is to take a vitamin pill.
- _____ 7. "Junk food" is fattening.
- _____ 8. Snacking is bad for you.
- _____ 9. Simple sugars should be avoided.
- _____ 10. Skipping breakfast can lead to binging at night.
- _____ 11. The average, healthy person requires 1200-1500 calories per day to maintain weight.

Answers:

1. Carbohydrates are the main source of energy in a normal intake. → *True*

The main purpose of carbohydrates (starches and sugars) is to provide energy or calories. A certain number of calories is needed each day to meet your basic energy needs. This means the energy needs to keep your brain, heart, liver, kidneys, etc. functioning even when you are doing nothing but sleeping. More energy is needed when you are doing any activity like sitting, standing, walking, or strenuous activity. The more active you are, the more calories you need. Foods high in carbohydrates are generally a good, cheap source of these calories. At least 50% of your daily energy should be from foods with carbohydrates.

Best sources of carbohydrates: grain products.

2. Vegetarianism is the healthiest way to eat. → *False*

Vegetarianism is one healthy way to eat but not necessarily the best way. Vegetarians avoid certain kinds of protein foods. An “ovolacto” vegetarian diet includes protein sources such as eggs, milk, cheese, and yogurt, but does not contain animal meats (e.g., beef, pork, poultry, and fish). “Vegan” diets do not have any food that comes from animals. When you exclude these animal foods, you are more likely to not get enough protein or some vitamins and minerals.

Most people with eating disorders avoid animal protein foods because they are afraid that these foods will make them gain weight. Avoiding any foods will make it harder to recover from an eating disorder (see section on “Phobic foods”).

Protein is an important nutrient in building and repairing tissue in your body and in keeping your immune system healthy. If you eat too much protein it will be used for energy instead of these other functions. Some people think that they will have stronger muscles if they increase the amount of protein they eat. This is not true. Strong muscles are made from eating enough carbohydrates, protein, and fat and then finding a balance between exercise and rest. The “extra” protein is used as extra calories and this puts more strain on your body systems to break it down and get rid of the extra waste products.

Best sources of high-quality protein: meat and alternatives.

3. Fat intake should be as low as possible. → *False*

Fat is an important nutrient in your meal plan and should not be avoided. Fat is an important source of fat-soluble vitamins (e.g., vitamins A, D, E, and K) and is needed to absorb these fat-soluble vitamins. It is also an important source of energy and provides a feeling of satiety (fullness) by slowing down how fast food leaves the stomach. In this way, fat can help prevent binges by giving you a longer-lasting sense of fullness.

There has been a lot written in the media lately about the dangers of fat. Unfortunately, many of these messages have gone overboard. Your body needs fat. It is recommended that you eat 25 to 30 per cent of your total calories from fat sources, with the majority of this from plants. This works out to about 60 grams of fat per day for women, and 75 grams for men.

Sources of fat: Oils, margarine, seeds, nuts, dairy products, meats, some fish.

4. Milk and milk products are a necessary part of a healthy meal plan. → *True*

Without milk products it is very difficult to get enough calcium in your meal plan. Too little calcium will put you at risk for osteoporosis, a disease in which your bones lose calcium and become very brittle and break easily. People (especially women) with eating disorders are at very high risk for osteoporosis. This is a disease which used to be seen primarily in elderly women. However, there has recently been an increase in the number of younger women with this problem. Risk factors for osteoporosis are often seen in people with eating disorders. These include low body weight, poor intake of calcium, and losing menstrual cycles (periods). Eating properly will lead to a healthy body weight, getting enough calcium, and a normal menstrual cycle.

Milk products also contain good quality protein and many other vitamins and minerals. If you have problems drinking milk (e.g., gas pains, diarrhea) it would be a good idea to talk with your dietitian/nutritionist about this.

Best sources of calcium: milk, cheese, yogurt, pudding, ice cream, dried beans, almonds, canned salmon (with bones), tofu, fortified soy beverages.

5. Meat is the best source of iron. → *True*

Meat contains a form of iron called “heme”, which is more easily absorbed or used in your body than plant sources (non-heme). Iron is a common deficiency in women, especially those with eating disorders. Iron is needed to keep your body working at its best. It is needed to make red blood cells.

The following are tips to help your body use iron better:

- › Animal sources of iron are better used by your body than plant sources.
- › Iron from plant sources is absorbed better if meat is eaten at the same meal.
- › Cut down on the amount of tea and coffee you drink with meals.
- › Eat foods high in vitamin C (e.g., oranges, tomatoes) with meals.
- › Use iron cookware (e.g., cast iron frying pan).

Best sources of iron: beef, lamb, pork, liver, veal, turkey, chicken, fish, seafood, cereals with iron added, wholegrain bread, lentils, dried peas, beans, seeds, nuts, dried fruits, dark green leafy vegetables, eggs.

6. The best way to get enough vitamins is to take a vitamin pill. → *False*

You can get all the vitamins and minerals your body needs by eating the type and amount of food recommended by Canada’s Food Guide. Vitamin/mineral supplements contain a lot of some nutrients but they are lacking in other important nutrients like carbohydrates, protein, and fat. If your eating is restricted or you are purging a lot it is a good idea to take a vitamin/mineral pill until your eating is normalized. Some people think that if they are taking a vitamin pill they don’t need to eat as much. This is not true. Your body needs a variety of nutrients and they are not all found in pill form.

Best sources of vitamins and minerals: a variety of foods from the 4 food groups (grain products, vegetables & fruit, milk & milk alternatives, and meat & alternatives), a moderate amount of fat daily, all other foods in moderation.

7. “Junk food” is fattening. → *False*

Most people think of “junk food” as things like pop, chips, french fries, chocolate, desserts, fast food, etc. Nothing is fattening when eaten in moderation. All foods can be part of a healthy intake. In fact, there really is no such thing as “junk” food. This is a very negative label and may lead one to divide food into “good” and “bad”. Many people feel that they are bad, even immoral, if they eat this “bad” food. Obviously, it wouldn’t be healthy to eat only chocolate bars; however there is nothing wrong with eating a chocolate bar once in awhile. Another thing that can happen when you avoid or deny yourself certain foods is that you may crave them more.

In recovering from an eating disorder, it is important to learn to eat a wide variety of foods, including those that you usually try to avoid, feel guilty about eating or that are part of your binge/purge cycle. You can live your life without a chocolate bar but if you are avoiding chocolate bars out of guilt or fear then it’s important at some point in your recovery to include them in your meal plan. You will eventually reach the point where you can take them or leave them without fear or guilt. There may be other foods besides chocolate bars which are difficult foods for you. These foods should be planned into your meal plan at some time as well, to help you get over the bad feelings about eating them.

8. Snacking is bad for you. → *False*

Snacks may in fact be good for you. People generally eat supper at around 6 p.m. If you don’t eat anything again until breakfast the next morning, this is a 12 to 14 hour fast. Your body is hungry after 3 to 5 hours, even if you don’t recognize it. If you eat supper at 6 p.m., you may need a snack by 10 p.m. Binging most often occurs when someone is hungry and often this hunger goes unrecognized. By making sure you eat every 3 to 5 hours, you can reduce the chance of binging.

Snack Ideas: fruit, vegetables, crackers, toast, cereal, muffins, juice, milk, yogurt, cookies, nuts, chips, chocolate bars.

9. Simple sugars should be avoided. → *False*

Too much sugar can be unhealthy but there is nothing wrong with sugar. Simple sugars are found in a variety of foods - milk, fruit, vegetables, desserts, sweets, etc. Sugar provides energy and it also gives food a good taste. Sugar helps you to enjoy food. Again, the important thing to remember is balance and moderation.

10. Skipping breakfast can lead to bingeing at night. → *True*

The most common reason that people binge is because they are hungry. Skipping breakfast can lead to hunger later in the day - the hunger “catches up” with you. This can lead to bingeing anytime during the day or evening. Remember your body needs food every 3 to 5 hours.

11. The average, healthy person requires 1200-1500 calories per day to maintain weight. → *False*

The average woman requires about 2000 calories per day to maintain normal weight. Men require about 2500 calories per day to maintain weight. It is usually not helpful to dwell on numbers and it is not recommended that you count calories. It can be helpful in challenging your ideas about food to realize how much food you really need.

Effects of starvation

Most people with eating disorders are in a state of starvation or semi-starvation. You don't have to be extremely thin to be starved. If your body is not getting all the food it needs, no matter what your weight, it begins to display some of the signs of starvation and malnutrition. Binging and purging does not allow your body to absorb all of the necessary nutrients. Therefore, individuals with bulimia can show signs of starvation.

Common effects of starvation

- Thinking about food all the time
- Weakness
- Poor concentration
- Binging
- A hard time making decisions
- Feeling cold all the time
- Mood swings
- Constipation
- A hard time sleeping
- Stomach bloating
- Depression
- Loss of menstrual cycles (periods)
- Social isolation (withdrawing from friends and family)
- Dry skin
- Lowered metabolic rate (how fast your body burns calories)

As you can see, the list is long. **Not** eating enough can affect many areas of your life. The good news is that there is a “cure” if you are suffering from any of these effects: eating! It is important to begin eating regular meals and snack(s) each day.

Non-dieting and mechanical eating

In order to recover from an eating disorder, you must begin a non-dieting approach to eating. This means learning to eat when you are hungry and stop eating when you are full, instead of being controlled by personal “rules”. You need to eat foods from all the food groups every day. Remember that your body needs fat. A non-dieting meal plan includes a wide variety of foods, even those you may be afraid to eat, like cake, cookies, candy, pizza, french fries, etc. These foods are often labelled “junk food”. In fact there is no “good” or “bad” food. You can eat anything in moderation.

Hunger and fullness signals

Most people with eating disorders have a hard time knowing when they are hungry and when they are full. You were born with these signals working very well and they probably controlled your eating. Sometime over the years (perhaps with dieting) you lost touch with these signals. It's not that they aren't there, it's just that you can't "read" them accurately all or much of the time.

To relearn these feelings, you can begin eating mechanically. **Mechanical eating** involves eating according to the clock. You are to eat breakfast no more than an hour after you get up; lunch about 4 hours later; supper about 4 hours after that and a snack before you go to bed. From this you can see that your body needs food about every 4 hours. In fact food is digested within 3-5 hours and your body is hungry after this, whether or not you recognize the signal. If you eat according to this schedule, you will begin to know when you are hungry and hunger will become a guide telling you when to eat. Many people are afraid of the feeling of hunger. It may mean for them that they are "out of control" or lack willpower. Remember that hunger is a normal feeling that each of us need to survive.

Night snacking

Many people have rules about eating at night. There is a popular myth that says it's bad to eat after 6 p.m. This simply is not true. In fact, a night snack can be very healthy. If you eat supper at 5:30 p.m. and then nothing until the next day, you are fasting for at least 12-14 hours. A snack at night can prevent night time bingeing and allow you to sleep better. People often have trouble sleeping and wake up at night because their bodies are hungry, even if they don't feel the hunger signals.

Meal planning

How much should you eat? You can work up to eating the amount of food in the Sample Meal Plan (later in this booklet). If you eat about this amount of food every day, you will begin to learn when you are full. Fullness (or satiety) is the feeling that tells us when to stop eating. Our bodies are "programmed" to take in the right amount of food every day!

Fuelling your body

Your body needs about 2000 calories per day if you are female and about 2500 if you are male. Adolescents require 200-500 more calories per day as their bodies are still growing. Below are sample meal plans to give you an idea of how much food is normal.

Sample Meal Plan

	Option A	Option B
Breakfast	Oatmeal muffin with cheese or peanut butter Banana Yogurt Milk	2 eggs 2 slices of toast with butter/jam Orange juice
Lunch	Turkey sandwich Fruit Granola bar Milk	Tomato soup with cheese Crackers Veggies and dip Milk
Supper	Pasta with meat/vegetable sauce Garlic bread Cranberry juice Cookie	Salmon Rice Vegetables Milk Ice cream
Snacks	Cereal and milk Crackers and cheese Toast and peanut butter Nuts, fruit, and yogurt Pita and hummus Veggies and dip	Cottage cheese and fruit Fruit and yogurt smoothie Chocolate bar Popcorn

Healthy weight

Heredity and genes

Weight is determined by heredity — it's in your genes. This is not the message we get through the media or even from some health professionals. We are led to believe that we can be whatever weight we want to be. This is not true. Each of us has a normal weight range that is determined by heredity. This weight range is called your set point. Studies show that if you try to change your set point weight, your body will react. When you try to go below your set point, your body metabolism slows down and you burn less calories. This is why some people may eat very little and yet not lose weight. For most people, their set point weight will be somewhere in the BMI range of 20-27, the healthy range. Even if your set point is above a BMI of 27, it is healthier for you to maintain this weight than to diet.

Effects of dieting

If you diet you can raise your set point. Our bodies are designed to withstand famine. When you diet, this is a famine. Metabolism slows down and it gets harder and harder to lose weight. When the diet stops, most people quickly regain the weight they lost and sometimes even add a few extra pounds. Perhaps your body is trying to protect you from the next famine. Up to 95% of people who diet regain the weight they've lost within 1-5 years. Diets don't work!

Weight and normal eating

If you eat normally, your weight will settle out in a range that is healthy for you. It's hard to say how long this will take — perhaps 6 months to a year of normal eating. Most people with eating disorders are scared to risk gaining weight if they eat normally. You need to decide if this risk is worth not having an eating disorder. **It is impossible to fully recover from an eating disorder while dieting.**

Constipation

Constipation is a common problem in people with eating disorders. For those with anorexia, it is due to the body slowing down during starvation and because not enough food has been eaten to make much waste or stool. Starvation affects people with bulimia in the same way. If you use laxatives as well, your body can become dependent on them and it becomes difficult to have a bowel movement (poop) without using laxatives.

Constipation can be cured most often through eating normally — 3 meals and snacks per day with enough fibre. Your body needs about 8-10 cups of non-caffeine fluids each day for normal hydration. Good sources of high fibre foods include: natural bran, bran cereals, wholegrain breads and cereals, fruits and vegetables. Caution: when adding bran to your diet, do so slowly — this will help you avoid diarrhea, cramps and bloating which can come from adding bran too quickly. One tablespoon per day is a good amount to start with.

Effects of laxatives, diuretics, and diet pills

Laxatives

Laxatives may help you lose weight **temporarily** by helping your body lose mostly fluid. They don't prevent your body from absorbing most of the calories in food. Abuse of laxatives has many serious side effects. They upset the body's mineral balance, especially potassium, which can lead to serious heart problems. They can cause dehydration from fluid loss, they can damage the lining of the digestive tract (stomach, intestines), and they let your bowel get lazy so that you may be constipated without using them.

Diuretics

Diuretics, or water pills, cause you to urinate (pee) more. Like laxatives, diuretics lead to temporary weight loss from fluid loss. Abuse of diuretics is dangerous for your health because it can lead to dehydration and loss of minerals (calcium, potassium, magnesium, and zinc), and can cause a rebound effect of retaining more salt and water, leading to weight gain.

Diet pills

Diet pills have many “magic” claims about losing weight. Diet pills can raise blood pressure, affect heart rhythm, interfere with hydration, and cause heart attacks or stroke. Many diet pills can have harmful interactions with prescription medications. Studies have shown that diet pills are not an effective form of weight management or appetite control. Even diet pills labelled as “herbal” or “natural” can be very harmful.

Reflux (heartburn)

Reflux results from food coming back up from your stomach into the esophagus. This can cause a painful burning sensation and/or vomiting. Some foods tend to make the burning worse. If you have heartburn, it’s a good idea to avoid caffeine, alcohol, citric foods (e.g., oranges), tomatoes, tomato sauces, peppermint, and any other food that causes you discomfort. Avoid eating within 2 hours of lying down and try raising the head of your bed about 6-8 inches. The symptoms of reflux will decrease when purging is stopped.

Bloating and gas pain

Bloating is a common feeling in the beginning stages of normalizing your eating. When you have been starving yourself either through restricting or purging, the gastro-intestinal (GI) system slows down. The food you eat is digested much slower than usual. You may feel bloated because your stomach is emptying slower than it should. The feeling of bloating is often worsened by foods that produce air in your gut (e.g., pop) or by swallowing air as you eat, usually from eating too quickly or on the run. This bloated feeling will lessen in time as you normalize your eating.

Many people use medication (motility agents) temporarily to speed up the rate of food moving through the gut. These are available by prescription from your doctor. You can also reduce these feelings of fullness by making temporary changes in your eating. Eating smaller meals more frequently often causes less discomfort. If you have a lot of flatulence or gas, it may be helpful to cut down your intake of gas-producing foods, such as onions, garlic, and foods in the cabbage family (broccoli, cauliflower, brussels sprouts).

Phobic foods

Phobic foods are foods which may cause some guilt or fear when eaten, or which lead to bingeing or purging. As stated in #7 of the Nutrition Knowledge Quiz, there are no “bad” foods. It is important in the recovery process to learn to eat all foods without fear or guilt. You can live your life quite comfortably without eating something like chocolate bars - that’s not the issue. However, if eating a chocolate bar causes a lot of negative feelings or behaviour, then it’s important to begin including them occasionally in your meal plan in order to overcome these negative effects. Give yourself permission by setting goals to eat them occasionally. This is a powerful way of ending this “food oppression”.

Goal setting

Eating behaviours do not change overnight. You may have months or even years worth of unhealthy eating patterns to change. This can take awhile. For some people this may take weeks, for others it may take months. You can work on it as slowly or as quickly as you are able. Start by setting one or two small goals each week and build on these over time. For example, if you’re not a breakfast eater, you might set a goal the first week to have a glass of juice at breakfast time 3 times during that week. When you have been able to do this, you can add to this goal by having juice more often in one week or by adding a bowl of cereal or piece of toast to the juice. Overall, you’re aiming at eating the amount of food shown in the Sample Meal Plan. With each goal you make to eat more like this plan, you get closer to normal eating. Once you have achieved a goal, keep doing it! Build on your goals. Another goal may be to decrease vomiting.

Make your goals very specific. Rather than saying: “I’m going to decrease vomiting”, state it specifically: “I’m going to cut down from 6 purges per week to 5”. You need to be able to measure whether or not you have achieved your goals and they need to be realistic. To say “I’m never going to purge again” is, for most people in the beginning stages of recovery, too difficult to achieve. Break it down into stages so that you don’t get discouraged. Setting goals is not about “passing” or “failing”. Sometimes we learn a lot about ourselves and our behaviours by not achieving our goals — it’s a learning process. When this happens, it’s important to look at the things that got in the way and ask the following questions: Was this goal too big for right now? What specifically prevented me from doing this? Are there other things I need to change before I can do this?

Below is an example of how someone might set goals to get to normal supper eating.

Week 1 — I'll have grains at supper (between 5 p.m. and 7 p.m.) 2 times in the next week with no purging.

Week 2 — I'll have grains at supper 3 times with no purging.

Week 3 — I'll add protein to supper 2 times with no purging.

Week 4 — I'll have 3 suppers with grains, vegetables and protein with no purging.

Week 5 — I'll have 4 suppers with grains, vegetables and protein with no purging.

Week 6 — I'll have 5 suppers with grains, vegetables and protein with no purging.

Week 7 — I'll add milk to 2 of my suppers with no purging.

Week 8 — I'll add milk or juice to 3 of my suppers with no purging.

As you achieve each goal, keep adding to it. It doesn't work to change goals each week, while forgetting about past ones.

Resources

National Eating Disorder Information Centre (NEDIC)

Phone: 416-340-4156 or 1-866-NEDIC-20

Email: nedic@uhn.on.ca

Website: www.nedic.ca

Eating Disorders Foundation of Canada

Phone: 1-519-858-5111

Email: info@edfofcanada.com

Website: <http://edfofcanada.com>

Gürze Books:

Eating Disorders Publications and Education

Website: www.gurzebooks.com

Local treatment resources

Nova Scotia Health Authority Eating Disorder Clinic

Room 3005, Abbie J. Lane Memorial Building

5909 Veterans' Memorial Lane, Halifax, NS B3H 2E2

Phone: 902-473-6288 Fax: 902-473-6282

Website: www.cdha.nshealth.ca

IWK Health Centre Eating Disorder Clinic

4th Floor Link, 5850/5980 University Avenue

PO Box 9700, Halifax, NS B3K 6R8

Phone: 902-470-8375 Fax: 902-470-7893

Looking for more health information?

This pamphlet and all our active patient pamphlets are searchable here: <http://library.cdha.nshealth.ca/chlibrary/Pamphlets>
Contact your local public library for books, videos, magazines, and other resources. For more information go to <http://library.novascotia.ca>

Nova Scotia Health Authority promotes a smoke-free, vape-free, and scent-free environment.

Please do not use perfumed products. Thank you!

Nova Scotia Health Authority

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