

Normal Eating

Are you a normal eater?

by Francie M. Berg



Normal eating means having a healthy relationship with food. It is flexible and trusting. With normal eating patterns, we eat as do small children and babies, consuming food naturally when hungry and stopping when full, attuned to inner signals. Normal eating refers to eating behavior – *how* a person eats, not *what*. Typical emphasis today focuses only on *what* foods people eat. *How* we eat gets ignored, yet it is at the root of many eating and weight problems. Normalizing eating can improve life immeasurably for the chronic dieter or disordered eater and help them move on with their lives.



What is normal eating?

- A healthy relationship with food that is natural, trusting and flexible.
- Usually eating at regular times, typically three meals and one or two snacks to satisfy hunger.
- The amount eaten is regulated by inner signals of hunger and satiety. The normal eater is attuned to these signals, eating when hungry and stopping when full and satisfied.

How does normal eating promote good health?

- The basic purpose or function of eating is to satisfy hunger and nourish the body. Normal eating fulfills this purpose, and thus enhances our feelings of well-being. Afterward we feel good. At times we eat for pleasure, to satisfy appetite and for social reasons, trusting that that's okay, too.
- Normal eating promotes one's natural weight, weight stability, and helps prevent both eating and weight problems. It nourishes wellness, health and the growth and development of children.
- Normal eating furthers clear thinking, the ability to concentrate, mood stability, and healthy relationships. Thoughts of food and weight take up only a small part of the day.
- Normal eating – at meals – means food choices likely provide balance, variety and moderation, the principles of good nutrition. It means all foods can fit. There are no “bad” or feared foods.



How does dysfunctional eating differ?



- Dysfunctional (disordered) eating is chaotic (dieting, fasting, bingeing, skipping meals), or it can mean overeating or undereating much more or less than the body wants or needs.
- The disordered eater eats less for nourishment, and more for purposes of reshaping the body, for thinness, or to relieve anxiety and stress.
- Often eating causes distress. Afterward, instead of feeling better, the disordered eater may feel guilty, ashamed, uncomfortably full, or unsatisfied and fearful of bingeing.
- When food is restricted, thoughts of food, eating, hunger and weight often dominate waking hours.
- Because food is unsatisfying and may be limited, the dysfunctional eater often feels tired, irritable, unable to concentrate, and increasingly self-absorbed.

How can parents promote normal eating?

- Offer a variety of nutritious food at regular intervals – usually three meals and two or three snacks (for children).
- Help the child identify feelings of hunger and fullness.
- Respect Ellyn Satter’s Division of Responsibility rules:¹
 - The parent is responsible for *what, when, where* the family eats.
 - The child is responsible for *how much* and *whether* he or she eats.
- Set a good example of normal, diet-free eating and positive body image.



¹Satter Ellyn. *Your Child's Weight: Helping without Harming* (2005), page 22. Madison, WI: Kelcy Press.