



## Moving towards natural and normal eating

Nutrition and eating is more than just your choice of foods or knowledge of nutrition. It includes your thoughts and feelings towards food, the role of eating in your relationships and social life, and the relationship you have with your body and yourself.

If you've experienced a difficult relationship with food and eating, it can be hard to remember what normal or natural eating is like. There is also not one way to eat that is normal for everyone. Generally, your nutrition requirements are met by regularly eating a variety of foods from the five major food groups each day, plus those foods that don't exactly fit into any food group. How much food you need to eat varies between people: if you're poorly nourished, whatever your weight may be, too much of one food group (such as fruit and vegetables) is unbalanced eating and may have a negative impact on your overall health and function. To help you with any questions regarding how much and what to eat - you may wish to seek the help of an Accredited Practising Dietitian (APD). What you may expect when you begin this journey? There are 3 phases on this journey to eating for your appetite/health.

### **Phase 1:** **Regular eating and eating enough**

- Eat regularly - 3 meals and 2-3 snacks, going no longer than 3-4 hours without eating from when you get up. Eating regularly will stimulate your metabolism, helps maintain blood sugar levels, improves digestion and reduce the risk of binge eating.

- Planning your eating can be helpful or it can keep you stuck following food rules. Discuss the approach with your team that works best for you.
- Get support - this might include speaking to family or friends, ensuring you have support from a team of health professionals and have access to other services if you need them
- Develop a 'scaffold' to build your eating on - the aim of this is to provide structure, without strict rules:
  - This might look like a meal plan from your dietitian, or a list of meal and snack choices to guide you
- Choose foods from all food groups throughout the day, to help meet your body's needs for health, and help manage your hunger levels and mood.
- Make meal times as comfortable and social as possible, with the understanding that sometimes mealtimes can be very difficult.
- If your weight is low, you will need to consider getting specific advice about strategies to restore your body and health. This will be unique to each person, and it's important to have individualised advice and support through this process.

Initially you may experience some discomfort in your stomach. Please be kind and patient with yourself and continue to eat regular meals and snacks. You may also experience an increase in your concern about eating and body weight, or fear that you will lose control and overeat. This is to be expected and will settle with time.

Remember to ask for more support if you need it to get through the more difficult moments. You can expect that the steps towards more natural eating are not necessarily smooth, but over time, eating will feel more comfortable and take up less of your thoughts and energy. Discuss any concerns you have with your treating team.

## How much do I need to eat?

Eating determined  
by food rules



Appetite driven  
normal eating

This is different for each person and is based on multiple things. Over time, your energy and nutrition needs vary with your age, gender, medical history, activity levels, stress levels, sleep patterns, genetics and other factors such as hormones. We suggest you discuss how to manage this with your dietitian, who can help you develop a plan that is suited to you.

## Making food choices

The only way to work towards choosing food that you like, and that will nourish you, is to address your fears and rules around food. No single food or nutrient is bad. It is always the balance of foods, lifestyle, and individual factors that influence your health over time.

## Phase 2: Developing confidence - variety and flexibility

- Start to notice more about your eating behaviours, thoughts and feelings. This will give you important information about how to make positive changes to your relationship with food and eating.
- Loosen the idea of foods being good or bad, healthy or unhealthy. All foods can have a place in a balanced diet.
- Begin challenging food rules and try having feared foods.
- As you gain confidence, practice becoming more flexible with food. This may need to be done gradually and with support to challenge any fears around change.
- Give yourself permission to try new foods - you might need some support from your health team to plan how to do this.
- Aim to start eating food in more social settings, or perhaps food prepared by others.

- Choose foods or meals that you would be happy to serve others, or that you see other people in your life eating.
- Notice your own taste preferences, without judging them as being right or wrong. Everyone has their own natural eating style, which includes personal preferences.
- Notice that there are a variety of eating behaviours, bodies and lifestyles.

## Food variety - what should I be eating?

### Breads and cereals

Include breads (any type), flat breads, breakfast cereals, rice, pasta, couscous, noodles, quinoa, muesli, biscuits, pizza bases, and other grain-based food. These foods provide fuel for our brain and muscles. They are also important source of dietary fibre for our large intestine (colon) and our colonic microorganisms

### Fruit and vegetables

Include all cooked vegetables, raw or salad vegetables, and fruit whether they are fresh, frozen, canned, in juice, and cooked in a variety of ways. To make room for other foods, and to meet nutritional requirements there may be times when this group needs to be limited.

### Dairy and alternatives

Include milk, yoghurt, cheese, custard, ice-cream to provide essential minerals for your bones and teeth. If choosing a non-dairy milk (such as soy or almond milks) you'll need to ensure that the calcium, protein, fat and energy levels are equivalent to the full cream dairy version.

### Meat and meat alternatives

Include animal protein foods such as beef, pork, chicken, lamb, fish, eggs and plant-based protein food such as tofu, legumes and lentils, nuts and seeds. These protein foods provide amino acids to build muscle but also other important nutrients such as, iodine, iron, zinc, vitamin B12 and essential fatty acids.

### Fats and oils

Include avocado, margarine, butter, olive oil and other oils, full fat salad dressings and mayonnaise. Including these foods in your diet provides the fatty acids such as omega 3's and omega 6's which are essential for good health and are a normal part of balanced meals.

### Other foods

There are lots of foods that may not fit into one of the five food groups above, but are a really important part of eating in a natural and social way. Being able to choose when to have, and being able to enjoy eating foods such as cake or dessert or chocolate, chips or take-away foods for example, without guilt or remorse is valuable, because it helps us to feel socially connected with others. 'Diet' foods are not recommended.

### Phase 3:

#### Internal awareness and trust.

- Learn mindful eating skills based on respect and trust in your own body cues.
- Develop an understanding of your appetite – learn to notice when you're hungry, when you're full, and when you're somewhere in between.
- Learn to build a more natural relationship to all kinds of foods – all foods are equal.
- With your health team, keep an eye on the 'big picture' to ensure that weight, body and food don't take up too much of your time and effort.

### Moving towards natural and normal eating in summary:

EATING CHOICES DICTATED BY FOOD RULE	➤ ➤ ➤	NATURAL, APPETITE DRIVEN EATING
PHASE 1	PHASE 2	PHASE 3
<b>Regular eating and eating enough</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Retraining and healing the body and brain with regular and adequate amount of food required for health</li><li>• Eating every 3-4 hours</li><li>• Plan ahead</li></ul>	<b>Developing confidence, variety and flexibility</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Awareness of eating behaviours</li><li>• Variety within food group</li><li>• Challenging food rules – beliefs of good vs bad food</li><li>• Morally neutral voice</li><li>• Permission to try new foods</li><li>• Eating more socially</li></ul>	<b>Internal awareness and trust</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Listen to hunger and satiety</li><li>• Mindful eating</li><li>• Acting according to values</li><li>• Balancing nutrition, intuition and life</li><li>• Cultivating the inner nutritionist</li></ul>

### Moving towards 'natural' eating flow chart

The flow chart describes this process of moving from a place where eating choices are being dictated by food rules towards a place of natural, appetite driven eating.

This flow chart can be used:

- **By the health professional** – gives direction of where your client is at, how strongly their choices are influenced by food rules and where the focus in session may need to be.
- **By the health professional and client** – assists in the process of change (ask the client where they think they are at and what steps it would

take to move into the next phase). It may also be used as a motivational tool for clients to continue to move forwards and when providing a rationale why clients may need to put their energy into regular eating first before working on increasing food choices and variety.

- **By the health professional and parents** – can be used to manage parents' expectations around what their daughter/son is currently able to manage. An example might be currently focusing on eating regularly and enough, and not yet working on eating out in a restaurant.