Dietitians Australia

Understanding your appetite

Understanding your appetite and the various factors that impact and regulate your appetite is an important part of eating disorder recovery. In the early stages of nutritional rehabilitation, your appetite signals are often 'off-line' or unreliable, though not broken. Understanding this can lead to increased awareness, allowing you to respond appropriately in time with treatment, to your internal cues for hunger and fullness again.

Moving through the stages of nutritional rehabilitation and healing your appetite allows you to develop a safe platform to build trust in your body again.

During this process your appetite can fluctuate widely. Initially in treatment, it is common to feel full quickly (known as early satiety). If this is being experienced, you may need to eat mechanically, or as directed by your treating team, even when you are not hungry! This may seem unusual, but please be patient, and continue to eat regular meals and snacks as recommended, allowing time for your body to adjust.

At other times you may experience extreme hunger, even after eating and that's OK. Your appetite regulation is healing. This takes time and is different for every person.

Hormones help regulate appetite

In healthy individuals, a symphony of hormones regulates many processes, including appetite. Table 1 summarises our key appetite hormones and their effects. Appetite hormones are only one part of the complex mechanism behind your body's ability to regulate hunger and fullness. There are, however, many things you can do to help connect with your appetite.

Here are a few ideas:

- Eat regular meals and snacks 3 hours apart. This will prevent you from getting too hungry and overeating or bingeing in response to the cascade of hormones that are produced when you are hungry. It also allows your brain to realise that food will now be available regularly and dependably to help address the impact of semi-starvation on appetite regulation.
- Aim to eat good quality protein and some fat at each of your main meals or as directed by your treating team, as this will help stabilise your appetite.
- When regular eating and eating enough is well established, appetite awareness monitoring can be helpful. Notice how you feel before, after and during meals using a hunger and satiety scale (your dietitian can provide you with one). People who eat to their natural appetite notice they generally eat between hungry and satisfied (on the scale) – and maintain their weight.
- Stop weighing yourself. Your dietitian can be helpful in assisting you to challenge your fears about weight gain and can weigh you during regular consultations if required. Strong thoughts and feelings about your weight can disconnect you from listening to your body.

- Write out a list of your feared (or avoided) foods from most to least feared. Start at the bottom and work your way through the list, eating them regularly until there is no guilt associated with eating that food. It is difficult to eat to your appetite if foods are not emotionally equal. There are no such things as "good" or "bad" foods for people who eat to their natural appetite.

- Remind yourself that:
  1. You cannot tell your body what to do AND listen to it at the same time.
  2. Trying to control your appetite by denying it or ignoring it is going up against strong physiological (and psychological) forces.
  3. The amount of food your body needs at any given time is unique to you. Comparing your intake with someone's is unhelpful and gets in the way of staying tuned in with your own appetite

Table 1: Hormones, their effect on appetite and how they interact with nutrients in our food

Hormone	Effect on appetite	Nutrient–hormone interaction
Leptin	• Suppresses appetite (in brain) • Triggers satiety (the feeling of fullness)	Protein generally increases circulating leptin.
Ghrelin	• Triggers hunger • Rises before meals and drops after meals in roughly 4 hour cycles (builds and builds until we eat)	Protein reduces ghrelin esp. high quality animal proteins.
Insulin	• Lowers blood glucose triggering carbohydrate cravings	Omega-3 fats may help increase insulin sensitivity.
Cholecystokinin (CCK)	• Suppresses hunger	Eating dietary fat causes release of CCK.
Serotonin	• Decreased levels triggers carbohydrate cravings	Eating sugary foods triggers calm feelings from increased serotonin.
Dopamine (neurotransmitter brain hormone but highly associated with appetite)	• Reinforces pleasure from food • Triggers cravings	Eating increases dopamine; Omega 3 fats and protein also increases dopamine levels.

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