How do I know when I'm no longer hungry?  

Dear Alice,

How can you tell when you're full? I am not over-weight, but I tend to over-eat. How can I know when to stop?

? Not Fully Aware

Answer

Dear Not Fully Aware,

Your question is one to which many people hope to learn more about. What makes answering it a challenge is that the feeling of no longer being hungry is a subjective experience and everyone's a bit different. As such, it's difficult to describe what comfortable fullness might feel like inside your body, but some people express it as being satisfied and content after eating. Others say it's a subtle feeling of fullness, of not being hungry anymore (even if there's still food on their plate). Getting familiar with what it feels like for you can take time and practice, but is a step in the direction of knowing your body better and changing the way you eat.

Some people were taught from an early age to finish everything on their plate, no matter how they felt (full or not). Unfortunately, this type of encouragement does little to teach children about listening to their bodies or learning to identify or conceptualize the feelings that come when they are satisfied with the amount or type of food they are eating. This conditioning experienced by many growing up, can carry on into adulthood. Others are out of touch with their body signals for other reasons. How often have you felt ravenously hungry and then couldn't believe how much you'd eaten? How much food does it seem to take to satisfy your hunger? Letting yourself get really, really hungry distorts awareness of body signals. When a person is out of touch or ignore subtle hunger cues, it can be difficult to detect subtle fullness. As a result, they're more likely to feel extremes between starving and feeling too full. There are also other societal cues to eat when not hungry or for reasons other than physical need. All this to say, there are many factors that influence how in touch (or not) people are with the cues their body sends them about hunger and feeling full.

In any case, you can begin by thinking about how you're feeling while you're eating ? a kind of checking in with yourself. This takes a conscious effort. Once you've eaten some of your food, consider asking yourself some of these questions: Does the food (still) taste good? Is my hunger beginning to subside? After a few more bites, am I beginning to feel satisfied? Try stopping about halfway through to determine if you've had enough. Another way to rate your
subjective fullness is to use a scale from one to ten:

1. Ready to collapse from hunger
2. Ravenous
3. Hungry
4. I could eat something, but not very hungry
5. Neutral
6. Not hungry at all
7. Comfortably satisfied
8. Full to very full
9. Stuffed
10. Extremely stuffed and possibly nauseous

If you go from a two to a nine easily, perhaps you’re going for too long without food, or your last meal was too small. Maybe your last meal was lacking key nutrients, such as protein, fat or fiber, which usually help to keep folks satisfied and feeling full over a few hours. Sometimes when people eat very quickly, a large quantity of food is consumed and before they realize it, they’re stuffed. If this is a situation you’ve encountered, try slowing down, taking your time chewing, swallowing, and resting between bites.

The most critical part about eating to a pleasant fullness is to eat consciously? to increase your awareness and to become more in tune with the signals your body is sending you. This takes practice for many people. Too often, people are distracted with other activities while eating? such as studying, watching television, or surfing the Internet, without realizing that they’re full, until the entire bowl of popcorn, liter of soda, or pizza is gone. Giving yourself time to enjoy and appreciate your food can help you notice and identify its effects on your body. You might also speak with a registered dietitian to further explore your eating habits and get some additional guidance.

Best of luck!

Alice!

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Columbia Health Nutrition Services (Morningside)
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