

Adapting your diet to better manage compulsive eating

Now that we have a better understanding of what triggers compulsive eating, let's take a look at dietary strategies that could help you lose control less often. Could our eating habits be partly responsible for the problem? This chapter will provide you with some keys for understanding and some tips for re-examining how you eat...and for getting back a little more of your freedom!

Let's forget the word "diet"

Are you tired of constantly watching your diet, trying to lose weight, and making many failed attempts without any real long-term success? What if, for once, you forgot about restricting your diet and took pleasure in eating again?

We saw it clearly in the preceding chapter: while restricted diets succeed in the short term, their long-term results are much less impressive! Once off the diet, people either go back to their old habits, become victims of compulsive eating, or experience a slowing down of their metabolism, which inevitably means they put the weight back on. Constantly imposing restrictions on yourself to lose or maintain weight means that your body no longer relies on sensations of hunger and fullness, and exists in a state of hyper control.

If you eat compulsively, you must stay connected to what you really want. You feel like some chocolate, but your inner voice tells you to have a low-fat yogurt? Maybe so, but you're still likely to dive into a box of chocolate cookies later in the day. It would have been wiser to have a few squares of chocolate and fully enjoy them, thus responding more satisfactorily to your true desire. By doing so, you replace the fear of missing out on or not having the right to certain foods with the satisfaction of having the right to eat everything...a diet revolution that reflects one of food's universal roles – to give us pleasure!

Of course, this behaviour is hard to adopt if you eat compulsively every day and if certain specific foods trigger bingeing. The best thing to do is to reintroduce these kinds of foods gradually (we will return to this in the next chapter).

GUIDELINES FOR “NOT DIETING”

- There are no “forbidden” foods; you can therefore eat anything, as long as you control how often you eat it.
- You’re aware of your hunger and stop eating when you’re full.
- You don’t eat for comfort when faced with a difficult situation.
- You only weigh yourself once a month.
- When you eat, you enjoy every mouthful, taking the time to really taste your food.

You don’t have to eat perfectly

Eating is one of life’s great pleasures. Some foods are more nutritious than others, naturally, but categorizing them as good or bad affects our relationship with them. Instead, let’s just say that there are foods we like to put on the menu regularly and others we eat only occasionally.

If, most of the time, you eat foods included in the *Food Guide*, and fruit and dairy desserts are lifestyle staples for you, then it’s normal and completely acceptable to spoil yourself with sweets or other gourmet treats from time to time. In other words, if you eat yogurt for dessert every night of the week, you have every right to enjoy chocolate cake at a restaurant on Saturday night... Similarly, if you eat whole grain toast for breakfast almost every morning, it’s totally acceptable to eat a croissant with the family on Sundays.

Eating well means putting healthy foods you like on the menu as often as possible, but it also means enjoying small, less nutritious treats from time to time. Eating everything without guilt may seem utopian for many people who suffer from compulsive eating or bulimia. You have to give yourself the time needed to rediscover this healthy relationship to food. Your dietician and your psychologist will help you get there.

True or false

It's important to count calories in order to know the exact amount of food to eat every day.

False

While this approach works well for some people, it's not recommended for everybody. It's healthier to recognize your body's signals that it's full than to calculate everything.

What exactly does eating well mean?

When you've spent years struggling with out-of-control eating, you get to the point where you no longer know what a balanced diet is. Should you count calories, or weigh foods?

Neither, actually, since strictly controlling your dietary intake will only trigger more sugar attacks. The best idea is to aim for the balanced plate! The plate provides a concrete model for healthy eating. If vegetables fill half the plate, proteins one quarter and grain products the other quarter, then the plate contains all essential foods. These food groups are supplemented by fruits and dairy products or substitutes. Sticking to the balanced plate at noon and in the evening does away with the need to count calories.

Fruit

Milk and alternatives

Vegetables (half of the plate represents two fist-sized servings)

Grain products (starches) (a quarter of the plate equals one fist-sized serving)

Meat and alternatives (a quarter of the plate is the size of a deck of cards or the palm of your hand)

Variety is also key. Some foods are reassuring for people who have a difficult relationship with food. You have to step out of your comfort zone to try new foods or reintroduce those you thought were forbidden – one at a time! They can first be reintroduced socially (with family, among friends); for example, if a chocolate dessert

causes anxiety, it's better to eat it at a party in the company of friends. The fact that everyone has a piece and enjoys it makes it a pleasant and less stressful experience...

For dessert, milk products, soy-based items and fruit are the best options. If you crave a decadent dessert, make a point of eating it slowly and really savouring it (see the mindfulness exercise suggested on page 90) and stop eating when you reach the point of fullness. This exercise is especially difficult when you're just beginning to take control. It's advisable to start with safer food items first, and then to introduce anxiety-causing foods when you're with someone close to you in whom you have confidence, or with your therapist.

Better controlling your appetite to reduce compulsive eating

Many people who watch their diet have very well-balanced days when they are perfectly in control (sometimes too much so!): whole grain bread in the morning, tuna salad at noon and fruit for snacks. Yet in the evening they lose control and eat whatever is handy, thus taking in a lot of extra calories. It's not surprising that their weight constantly fluctuates! Here are the key principles for overcoming loss of control.

The 3-3-3 rule

In order to stabilize your body's natural weight and thus prevent any future weight gain triggered by repetitive dieting, you have to work with your body. Reassure it that there will be no more periods of starvation, and that it can stop being constantly on the alert. By following the 3-3-3 rule, you can give yourself this internal reassurance.

3 meals → 3 snacks → Every 3 hours

You can start by trying follow this schedule without paying too much attention to varying the content, just to get into the habit; according to our observations, this takes two weeks, with the help of the food diary found in chapter 5 (see page 115). Eat normal, everyday foods, like a chicken sandwich or a bowl of cereal with a banana, for example.

If you need more guidance, you can vary what you eat by aiming for the balanced plate described on page 41. The goal is to eat mechanically, by the clock, every three hours or so.

It's normal not to feel hungry on this schedule at the beginning. Ask yourself how long it has been since you last ate three meals and three snacks, day after day, for weeks, or months. Your hunger and feelings of fullness will come back, but you'll have to be patient and kind to your body. This can also be a good opportunity to learn to cook and to enjoy travelling via exotic dishes. Shall we go to India or Thailand this evening? This epicurean approach helps us reconnect with the taste of different foods, eat more slowly and let go of our food taboos.

AN EXAMPLE OF A DAY FOLLOWING THE 3-3-3 RULE

6:30 a.m. Breakfast

- Two pieces of whole-grain toast
- Almond butter
- 2 clementines
- A glass of milk

9:30 a.m. Morning snack

- A fruit yoghurt sprinkled with chia seeds and a nectarine

12:30 p.m. Lunch

- One whole-wheat pita bread with a small tin of tuna
- Carrots, cucumbers and peppers + hummus
- Rice pudding

3:30 p.m. Afternoon snack

- 2 rye crackers and 50 g of cheese

6:30 p.m. Dinner

- 90 g of grilled chicken (the size of the palm of your hand)
- Quinoa with vegetables (the size of a fist)
- Arugula and tomato salad
- 1 yoghurt

9:30 p.m. Evening snack

- A package of oatmeal cooked in soy milk

True or false?

Breakfast is the most important meal of the day.

True

After fasting for 8 to 12 hours, it's important to refuel to better face the day. Ideally, breakfast should include three of the four groups in CANADA'S FOOD GUIDE. You're not hungry in the morning? Maybe it's because you snack in the evening? If you're really not hungry, have a nutritious snack around 9:30 (whole wheat crackers, cheese and fruit or yoghurt and a home-made muffin). Don't go without protein in the morning!

The evening meal should be the lightest.

True

Since we are more physically active during the day than in the evening, it's true that we need more energy to carry out our tasks. On the other hand, since noon-hour breaks are often limited to 30 minutes, it's understandable that the evening meal is often the main meal of the day. By listening to your fullness signals, you'll be able to not eat too much at night, and therefore to digest well and, as a result, sleep better.

Serotonin: the key to control for “emotional” eaters

In her book *The Serotonin Solution*, Dr. Judith J. Wurtman, a researcher at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, suggests a way of eating that makes you feel

fuller and reduces the frequency of compulsive eating episodes related to emotions. The key to her research lies in a neurotransmitter, serotonin, that regulates a number of body functions, including dietary and sexual behaviour. Serotonin has the ability to boost morale, so much so that the mode of action of many antidepressants is to increase its availability. Some foods are able to increase the amount of serotonin circulating in our body. In fact, the more serotonin we have, the more we are in control of what we eat.

Naturally, when we are in the grip of “psychological” hunger (triggered by an emotion), the body craves carbohydrates in various forms (donuts, crackers, chips, bread, cereal). This is normal, since high-carbohydrate foods are the only ones, when eaten in sufficient amounts, that increase the serotonin in circulation. Low-carbohydrate diets, which are still very popular, are not at all recommended for “emotional” eaters. They deplete the carbohydrate reserves in the liver and muscles, causing fluid loss as well. Feeling thinner, many people like the result, but as soon as they reintroduce carbohydrates, the reserves build up again and their weight inevitably goes up. As a bonus, they may even have sugar cravings!

Managing compulsive eating calls for including carbohydrates in every meal, in addition to snacks. If you want to avoid losing control in the evening, you must eat enough grain products (or starches) during the day. They will preferably be whole grain, so as to make you feel even fuller. Fruits will not have the same impact. These foods should be low in fat, as this nutrient slows down digestion and serotonin production. Too many people watch their calories so closely during the day that they eat only yoghurt and fruit in the morning and salad at lunch – there’s nothing worse for triggering compulsive eating in the evening!

PMS: DYING FOR SUGAR!

The hormonal changes that occur before a period change serotonin levels. The neurotransmitter becomes less effective in managing appetite control. To avoid eating compulsively, you can increase the amount of grain products for three to five days

before your period. Take care as well to eat grain products (or starches) at every one of your three meals, as well as to include two mainly carbohydrate snacks (crackers, oatmeal, cereal bars, etc.).

Examples of grain products to include in meals and snacks:

- Whole wheat bread (1 or 2 slices)
- Bagel or English muffin (1 unit)
- Whole-wheat pita (1 unit)
- Pasta, rice, couscous, quinoa (125-150 ml)
- Crackers (2-5)
- Low-sugar cereals* (125-250 ml)
- Oatmeal (175-250 ml)
- Low-sugar cereal bars*

Still craving sugar? Choose dried dates, a little dark chocolate or a chocolate soy pudding.

*Try to choose breakfast cereals with fewer than 5 grams of sugar per 30-gram serving and cereal bars containing fewer than 8 grams of sugar each.

A thoughts journal: to gain a better understanding

A personal thoughts journal is a very useful tool for better understanding our eating habits and especially for making us aware of our emotional and psychological relationship with food. It's a way of observing our behaviours with respect to food, with curiosity and without making judgments: Where and when do we consume food? What exactly do we eat? What thoughts or emotions do we experience at those times? Do we feel like we're losing control?

Here's an example that may inspire you to write your own journal.

Day and time	Food eaten	Context (Where? With whom?)	Feeling of losing control	Thought	Emotion
Tuesday 5:30 p.m.	Large bag of chips	Alone in my car after work	Yes	I'm exhausted, I don't want to be alone at home.	Fatigue Solitude
Saturday 3:00 p.m.	10 chocolate cookies 3 slices of pizza	Alone at home	Yes	I shouldn't just do nothing, I'm lazy!	Anger Shame Sadness
Sunday 6:00 p.m.	3 beers Double serving of fries	With my parents and my sister at my parents' place	Yes	My mother made me fries, she knows it's hard for me and she made them anyway!	Anger Powerlessness
Thursday 7:00 p.m.	Spare ribs with fries and dessert	At a restaurant with colleagues	No	Everybody is having ribs, me too!	Fatigue Festive
Saturday 9:00 p.m.	Ice cream – 2 big bowls and half a bag of chips	Alone in bed at home	Yes	I had a blind date tonight, I didn't go, I was too afraid I'd be rejected.	Shame Sadness Solitude
Friday 6:00 p.m.	Tuna salad	At a restaurant with friends for a birthday	No	I'm the only one not having birthday cake. Nobody wants to see a fat woman eating cake!	Shame Injustice Pride

Tuesday 5:00 p.m.	Large piece of cheese 30 crackers 1 glass of wine	At home with the kids	Yes	I have to make dinner for the kids, I'm exhausted, they make so much noise!	Irritation Fatigue
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We suggest you make a note of everything you eat for several weeks, without recording calories or measuring the food.

Sometimes, when the eating disorder has gone on for a long time, our emotions are harder to understand, as if, over time and as we ignore the basic signals like hunger, the wires have little by little become disconnected. To help you identify your emotions, a list is often a big help. You'll find one in Annex 2 of this book. Start with the discomfort you feel or the thought you've identified, and ask yourself more detailed questions as you read through the basic emotions listed.

As you do this, based on your notes, see if you can pick out similarities or constant themes. In other words, can you detect thoughts, emotions, situations or contexts that recur and contribute to triggering compulsive eating?

To help you do this, ask yourself the following questions:

- Does the compulsion always occur in a particular situation?
- What emotion or thought is most often present when I lose control around food?
- Does this happen on days when I haven't eaten enough at mealtimes or snack times?

These elements will help you pinpoint what you need to work on to break the compulsive eating cycle.

"For me, the most important words are HEALTH and BALANCE. In 2009, I was diagnosed with lumbar stenosis; I could no longer stand up without terrible pain, I was overweight and I lacked energy. Why, you ask? Because, like many women, I had

forgotten to look after myself so as to look after my family and those I love, and I got sick. I had to review my priorities to be able to take my life in hand again and regain my health.

So I began by changing my diet to lose my extra weight, but also to reduce the inflammation in my body.

As I lost weight, I began to write down how I felt, because I had a basic need to take note of everything I ate, felt and did. My diary became my best ally. Through my writing, I realized why I was eating my emotions and why I had paid so little attention to myself. I even understood the factors that made me eat compulsively! Now that I'm aware of all of these harmful things, I'm able to understand what my healthy choices mean to me and put them into practice. I know that all my life I'm going to have to put my choices into perspective to maintain my equilibrium, because bad habits often come rushing back. But by continuing to write in my health diary, I'm taking care of myself and staying aware of the positive attitudes I have to adopt to stay healthy and feel good about myself."

Natacha Watier

What should you eat to feel more satisfied?

Once we stop counting calories, we need to focus on foods that fill us up quickly. We also have to try to trust our feelings of fullness to stop eating when we've satisfied our hunger (we will come back to this subject in Chapter 5).

High-protein foods (meat, poultry, fish, eggs, nuts, cheese, legumes) and those high in fibre (legumes, whole-grain cereals, chia seeds, etc.) are particularly filling.

True or false?

Everyone should avoid gluten.

False.

Despite its popularity, a gluten-free diet is not for everyone – just people with celiac disease (1% of the population), as well as those who are hypersensitive to gluten (3 to 5% of the population). For everyone else, the advantages of whole wheat, whole oats and other grains are widely recognized by science. Gluten-free foods are often lower in fibre and higher in sugar than ordinary grain products. They are seldom the best choice. Avoiding gluten in your diet is not advisable, unless your healthcare professional recommends you do so.

The more rapidly absorbed sugar a food contains, the more it will destabilize blood sugar, which risks causing a new craving. By avoiding rapidly absorbed sugars (honey, jam, white sugar, candies, etc.) and by choosing instead foods with a low glycemic index, you avoid blood sugar fluctuations and promote a feeling of fullness. The glycemic index is influenced by the presence of other foods (for example, fats lower it) and by cooking (pasta al dente has a lower index than well-cooked pasta). (See the glycemic index table on page 65.)

A few tips for feeling full faster

- **Increase fibre consumption**

High-fibre foods provide a feeling of fullness. Whole-wheat pasta is more filling than pasta made from refined flour. The same is true of whole-grain bread and high-fibre cereal. Take the time to read nutrition information labels and choose products that have the highest amount of fibre.

- **Eat enough protein.**

Like fibre, protein satisfies hunger. So be sure to include a protein source in every meal (egg, cheese, or peanut butter in the morning, meat, poultry, fish or legumes at noon and in the evening). Protein foods are frequently overlooked in the morning and at noon. This is a shame, because hard-to-control cravings are then likely to occur during the day.

- **Limit sugary drinks**

It's a proven fact that the calories we drink are far less sustaining than those we eat. Keep a close eye on all drinks (fruit cocktails, soft drinks, energy drinks, juice, iced tea, flavoured coffees...). Water, milk and plant-based drinks remain the best beverage choices. Tea and coffee, with no added sugar, are also good options.

- **Eat lots of vegetables**

Noon and night, be sure to fill half your plate with vegetables (see the balanced plate on p. 41). The more vegetables you eat, the less hungry you'll be! To reduce hunger, you can also start a meal with soup, a glass of vegetable juice or a salad. These are also the best starters to choose in a restaurant!

- **Plan nutritious snacks**

Snacks are a big help in curbing cravings during the day. Ideally, they combine carbohydrates and protein, so as to stabilize blood sugar effectively and limit cravings. Here are a few ideas for snacks to include in the morning or afternoon to boost your energy, as well as help you hold on until your next meal.

10 snack ideas that provide a good carbohydrate-protein ratio

1. A small Greek yoghurt with fruit
2. A small bunch of grapes with cottage cheese
3. A handful of dried cranberries with a handful of almonds*
4. Low-sodium vegetable juice + a hard-boiled egg
5. A slice of whole-grain bread + peanut butter
6. An apple + one individual packet of cheese
7. A few crackers + hummus
8. A soy beverage in a tetra pack + a handful of pumpkin seeds
9. An apple + a handful of roasted chickpeas
10. Raw vegetables + a handful of peanuts

The afternoon snack is without doubt the most important one in terms of compulsive eating. It helps you better resist the temptation to dive into the fridge or cupboards when you get home. For people who eat late, it's a good idea to have two afternoon snacks, one at around 3 p.m. and the other around 5:30 p.m., to avoid raiding the cupboards the minute you get there. Having a snack at the office, just before leaving, is a good solution for people who tend to lose control on arrival. Eating a little something also lowers the risk of stopping at the convenience store on the way. So, for example, when you take your vegetables and piece of cheese to work, you limit how much you eat and, even more importantly, you won't find yourself at the mercy of the entire block of cheese perched on the kitchen counter!

* Since we avoid weighing or measuring foods, we usually talk about handfuls of nuts. A handful (fist closed) is a good serving. Individual packets of nuts (20 to 30 grams) are also good options. No need to calculate!

True or false?

Food eaten outside mealtimes makes you fat.

False

On the contrary, when you eat satisfying snacks, you'll eat less at the next meal. A snack combining carbohydrates and proteins (see our snack ideas on page 55) will be sustaining enough to keep you from diving into the fridge when you get home.

The evening snack is important, especially for people who get up at night to eat. Since we're often prone to eat compulsively in the evening, it's better to opt for a less risky snack. You'll be less likely to get carried away by a bowl of yoghurt with fruit than by a bowl of cereal that may lead to a second bowl... Sometimes just a soy drink or a glass of milk will do in the evening!

Night eaters?

People who eat during the night may have hypoglycemia without knowing it. Since blood sugar (the level of sugar in the blood) falls sharply in the middle of the night, these people wake up and invariably go looking for sources of carbohydrates. To prevent

these awakenings, which interfere with sleep and weight control, plan for a snack just before going to bed. A source of carbohydrates and soluble fibre, oatmeal cooked in milk is an excellent choice. It helps stabilize blood sugar levels. You can also choose a Greek yoghurt with chia seeds added!

When you re-establish your relationship with food by eating to satisfy actual hunger in a healthy way, without calorie counting, while also exercising for enjoyment, your weight will remain stable. What a relief to no longer experience the yo-yo phenomenon!

What about giving some thought to our intestine?

Research in recent years has emphasized the importance of balanced intestinal flora for many health problems. In fact, we now know that a large portion of serotonin is secreted by the cells in our intestine and that our microbial flora (or microbiome) may be directly related to our emotions...quite a piece of news! Approaches for intervention are not yet clear, but we can bet that the coming years will reveal the importance of probiotics for modifying our moods, and even our eating habits.

The diversity of microbial flora is positively associated with health. It has been observed that overweight people have less diversified flora. Diet explains most microbiome variations.

10 tips for balancing your microbiome

increase your consumption of:

1. Fibre (researchers estimate that intakes of from 50 to 55 grams per day would be desirable, or roughly twice the current recommendations);
2. Fruits and vegetables (7 to 10 servings a day);
3. Fish (for its anti-inflammatory qualities);
4. Good sources of polyphenols (raisins, wine, cocoa, berries);
5. Fermented products (kefir, kombucha, sauerkraut, kimchi, yoghurt);
6. Prebiotics (like inulin) that feed the intestine's microorganisms.

Limit your consumption of:

7. Sugar (this can affect the permeability of the intestinal membrane and thus destabilize the organism);
8. Saturated fats (including coconut oil);
9. Products containing emulsifiers (ice cream, commercially produced salad dressings);
10. Sweeteners.

Remember:

- Say goodbye to diets, as they can trigger compulsive eating.
- Respect the 3-3-3 rule: eat 3 meals and 3 snacks, every 3 hours.
- Adopt the balanced plate.
- Keep a thoughts journal to better understand the situations in which you give in to cravings.
- Select foods that promote fullness (proteins, fibre, foods with a low glycemic index).
- Choose foods that promote balance in your microbiome.