

Loss of Appetite

What is appetite?

Appetite is a natural desire or need for food. Although an appetite out of control can be a problem, a good appetite is most often a sign of health and well-being.

Appetite is a combination of:

- Hunger
- Habit
- Enjoying the taste, sight, and smell of food
- Looking forward to sharing the pleasure of a meal

Loss of appetite can cause health problems if you stop eating a healthy diet. As you get older, you may not need as many calories as you needed when you were 20. But you keep needing the right mix of proteins, minerals, and vitamins throughout life in order to stay healthy.

Most often, loss of appetite is not a symptom of a serious disease. However, it can be a sign of illness. If you have a lack of appetite, it's always a good idea to talk with your provider about it.

What causes a loss of appetite?

You may lose interest in food because of:

- Some medicines that affect appetite
- Depression
- Problems with teeth or dentures
- Illness
- Pain
- A reduced sense of taste and smell, especially as you get older

What are the symptoms of problems that might be caused by a loss of appetite?

Symptoms of problems caused by not eating enough healthy food may include:

- Weight loss
- Tiredness
- Lack of interest in the things you normally enjoy
- Changes in your skin, hair or nails because you are not getting the nutrients you need
- Constipation from not eating enough fiber

Any unexplained appetite loss that lasts longer than a week could be a sign of a more serious problem.

How much should I weigh?

There is a wide range of healthy weights for any particular height. Also, being fit and healthy is more complicated than just having a good weight. Still, no matter what medical problems you have, there is a range of normal healthy weights for your height. Here is a simple table showing the low to high ranges of healthy weight for different heights:

Height	Low Ideal Weight	High Ideal Weight
5 feet	100 pounds	125 pounds
5 feet, 6 inches	120 pounds	150 pounds
6 feet, 0 inches	145 pounds	180 pounds

You can check with your healthcare provider to see if you should be concerned about your weight.

How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will review your general health, ask about other symptoms, and examine you. You may have some blood tests. If you have lost 10 pounds or more in a couple months or less, you may have more extensive tests.

How is it treated?

Treatment of weight loss depends on the cause. For example:

- If a medicine you are taking seems to be affecting your appetite, your healthcare provider can work with you to find a different medicine or dose that will treat your medical problem without affecting your appetite.
- If you have lost your appetite because of depression, treating the depression should help you get your appetite back in a few weeks.
- If you have problems with your teeth, your provider may recommend seeing your dentist. Healthy teeth and the ability to chew without pain, worry, or embarrassment are important to being able to eat healthy foods.
- If tests show that you have a vitamin or hormone problem, your provider will recommend a change in your diet, supplements, or treatment for the hormone problem.
- If ongoing pain is making it hard for you to feel like eating, you will work with your provider to find a combination of medicine and physical or relaxation exercises to control the pain as much as possible.
- When your loss of appetite is due to illness, you may want to ask your provider for a referral to a dietitian. The dietitian can help you find foods that don't make you feel worse. You may also find more foods that you can tolerate and maybe even learn to enjoy despite your poor appetite.

How can I take care of myself?

- Think about why you have less appetite than you used to have. Sometimes loneliness affects appetite. It might help to arrange to eat lunch with friends or a relative sometimes. If you are a senior, you might enjoy eating some of your meals at a senior center. Keep food in your kitchen that doesn't take much time to prepare and can be eaten right out of the refrigerator or easily heated in the microwave. Avoid cooking strong-smelling foods, like fish or cauliflower, if that seems to affect your appetite.
- One problem with poor appetite is that you may not be getting enough vitamins and minerals to keep you healthy. Be sure to include fresh fruit and vegetables in your diet. You can often use the salad bar at your local grocery store to get variety without having to buy more than you need.
- Set regular meal times. Eat 3 or 4 small meals through the day, rather than 1 or 2 large ones. Eat slowly and relax for 30 minutes after eating. If you are underweight, you may also need 2 or 3 snacks between meals to gain weight.
- Make sure every bite counts.
 - Eat high-protein foods, such as cheese, eggs, fish, meat, and milk.
 - Start with the high-calorie foods first at each meal. Then eat the vegetables and fruits and drink your beverage.
- Ask your provider or dietitian if sipping high-calorie nutrition drinks would be helpful (for example, Carnation Instant Breakfast, Ensure, Resource, or Boost). If you have trouble digesting milk and milk products (lactose intolerance), ask your provider or dietitian which nutrition drinks would be right for you.
- Get regular exercise according to your healthcare provider's recommendations. Exercise can improve a poor appetite.
- Weigh yourself at least every 1 to 2 weeks and write down your weight. Contact your healthcare provider if you have lost 10 pounds or more in the last couple of months without trying to diet.

Developed by RelayHealth.

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