Food and Feelings

Understanding the relationship

You need food to survive, but food is also connected to feelings in several ways.

- Food affects chemicals in the brain that control mood, appetite, thoughts, feelings, and actions. For example, one chemical that affects mood is serotonin. Your body makes serotonin from foods such as dairy, beef, poultry, nuts, beans, pasta, and breads.
- Childhood memories affect food choices. Sweets such as cake and candy may be linked in your mind to happy times such as birthday parties. You might enjoy a favorite food Mom would make to help you feel better when you were sick. Your parents may have used food as a reward for good work, such as always getting ice cream after doing your chores. Other foods may produce bad feelings. For example, vegetables you did not like but had to eat before being excused from the table.
- Food can be used as a way to deal with stress, anger, anxiety, boredom, sadness, and loneliness. These feelings may be caused by major life events or by day-to-day problems. Eating comfort foods may be a way to take your mind off your troubles, or a way to try to get the energy to deal with things. If you feel short of time and energy, you might eat junk food or fast food because it's quick and easy. Eating to deal with feelings, also called emotional eating, often involves eating unhealthy foods. Comfort foods such as starchy, sweet, salty, and fatty foods can cause health problems such as weight gain and increased risk for heart disease.

Managing food and mood

There are several steps you can take to make sure that you are not using food to deal with feelings:

- If you eat to deal with emotions, try to learn where it comes from. Do you crave a certain food (such as sweets or starch) that you remember from childhood? Are you feeling too stressed to worry about having a healthy meal? For several days, write down what makes you want to eat, how hungry you are, when you eat, what you eat, how much you eat, and how you feel after you eat. This helps you see patterns and tells you which foods and situations to avoid.
- Learn to recognize true hunger. Is your hunger physical or emotional? If you ate just a few hours ago and don't have a rumbling stomach, you are probably not physically hungry. Emotional hunger tends to come on suddenly and can only be satisfied by eating a certain food. You may keep eating even when full, and then feel guilty afterwards.
- Find other ways to make yourself feel better. Instead of eating an unhealthy food, take a walk, watch a movie, or call a friend. Talking to someone about what is stressing you is more helpful than overeating.

- Exercise regularly. Exercise can be a good way to relieve stress. Sports or group activities can help prevent boredom and loneliness. Walking can be soothing when you feel anxious or sad. Choose exercise that you enjoy.
- Eat a healthy diet. When you fill up on the right kinds of food, you are more likely to feel fuller, and stay full longer. Eat more whole grains, vegetables, and fruits, as well as low-fat dairy products and lean meats. Try to eat at regular mealtimes.
- Snack healthy. If you feel the urge to eat between meals, choose a low-fat, low-calorie food, such as fresh fruit, pretzels, or unbuttered popcorn. Don't keep unhealthy foods around.
- Don't completely deny yourself foods that taste good. Try eating sugar free chocolate pudding or low-fat ice cream.
- Drink plenty of calorie-free liquids, such as flavored water or tea. Some people confuse thirst with hunger.
- If you give in to emotional eating, forgive yourself and try to learn from it. Plan how to prevent it in the future.

For more information about healthy eating, contact:
- The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics
  800-877-1600
  http://www.eatright.org

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