

The Health Impact of the Restrict-Overeat Cycle

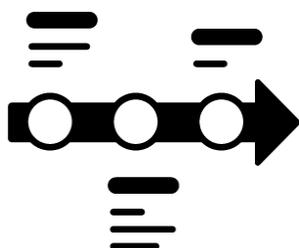
Before Getting Started...

Take a few minutes to discuss the following questions with your nutritionist:

- How does your body tell you if you're hungry or full?
- Why do you think our bodies send us signals when we are feeling hungry and full?
- Why might someone ignore his or her hunger and fullness cues?

Teen Years: Time For Growth, Change, and Independence

Teens go through a lot of changes as they transition to different schools, develop friendships, gain independence, and experience changes in their body and appearance. All of these changes can be overwhelming and hard to handle. With pressure and responsibility to look or eat a certain way, teens may turn to food to feel in control and ignore their body's natural hunger and fullness cues to reinforce this feeling of autonomy.



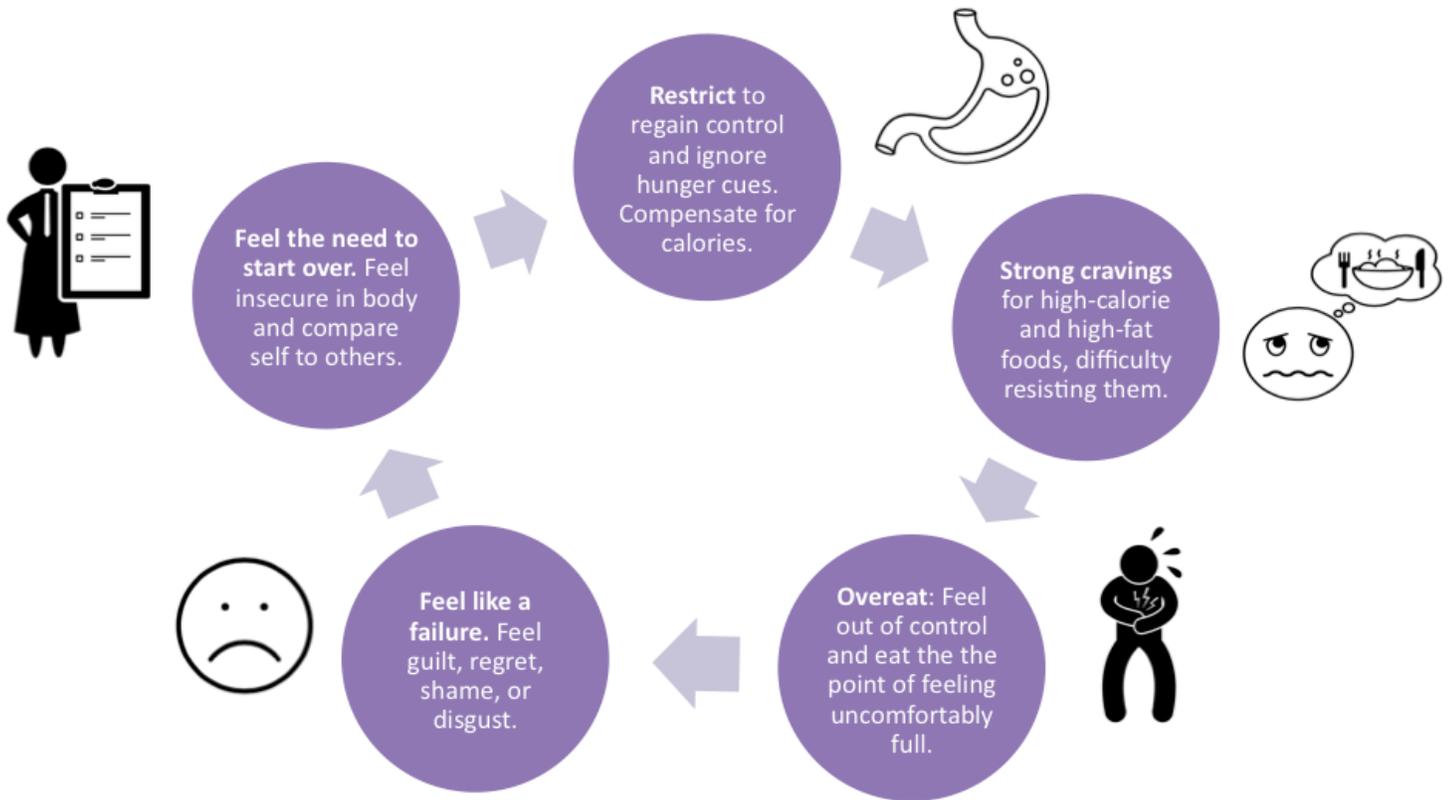
How Do Our Bodies Respond When We Ignore Hunger Cues?

Our bodies are very adaptive and work hard to try to keep our weight in a healthy range and our energy level consistent despite day-to-day changes in eating and exercise. Hunger cues remind us to eat to meet our energy needs. When we ignore these cues and don't provide our bodies with enough energy (also called energy restriction), other mechanisms take over:

- Metabolism slows to preserve energy so the body “burns” calories less efficiently
- Hormones signal the body to store fat and interfere with building muscle
- Blood sugar drops which can cause someone to feel dizzy, weak, and irritable
- Concentration and thinking slow as the brain becomes hyper-focused on food
- Cravings for high-fat and high-sugar foods and drinks are stronger and harder to resist

Restriction is often the first step in an ongoing, harmful restrict-overeat cycle. Physically restricting your energy or nutrient intake (ex. limiting yourself to a certain number of calories or a certain number of carbohydrates) and/or mentally restricting your energy or nutrient intake (ex. only allowing yourself “good” carbohydrates or sweets on “cheat days”) can set you up for a harmful cycle that can be physically and mentally draining.

The Harmful Restrict-Overeat Cycle



The only way to break this cycle is to stop restricting and start giving your body the nutrition it needs with a balance and variety of foods.

Are My Eating Habits a Problem?

We live in a culture where dieting and weight loss are common topics of conversation, which can make it hard to know whether eating habits are healthy or disordered.

Generally, your eating habits may be a sign of an eating disorder if you begin to have extreme emotions, attitudes, and behaviors around food, exercise, and/or body image. Research actually shows people with eating disorders have chemical changes that happen in the brain that impact the way they think about food, nutrition, and their bodies.¹



Below are some behaviors that may indicate an eating disorder.

Signs and Symptoms of an Eating Disorder:

(Adapted from the National Eating Disorder Association)

- Trying to stay within a certain number of calories or cutting out entire food groups (ex. starches and grains, high-fat foods, dairy, meat, etc.)
- Skipping meals, fasting, dieting, or grazing throughout the day without planned meals
- Eating an amount of food that is much larger than most people would eat under similar circumstances, feeling out of control around food, and eating to the point of feeling uncomfortably full (also called binge eating)
- Eating alone out of embarrassment about the type or quantity of food being eaten
- Feeling the need to “burn off” calories by exercising, vomiting, or using laxatives or diuretics due to feeling disgusted, regretful, or guilty after eating (also called purging)
- Spending less time with friends and family, planning time around bingeing and/or purging
- All-or-nothing thinking, strong need for control over food and exercise choices, and difficulty expressing emotions
- Being preoccupied with thoughts about food, calories, and/or weight

In contrast, normal and healthy eating is on the other end of the spectrum. While this can look different for everyone, some principles of normal, healthy eating are outlined below:

Principles of Normal, Healthy Eating:

- Eating when you're hungry and stopping when you're full and satisfied
- Being flexible with food choices depending on your schedule, mood, and social events
- Making food choices based on what your body needs and what you enjoy eating
- Trusting your body's ability to regulate your energy needs and weight by listening to your internal hunger and fullness cues
- Spending some time thinking about food, nutrition and your body but not being so focused that these thoughts distract you from your interests and relationships

Disordered eating is the gray area between healthy eating and an eating disorder, where someone may not identify completely with normal and healthy eating principles or with symptoms of an eating disorder. Since disordered eating can increase someone's risk of developing an eating disorder, teens who suspect they may have disordered eating should share this with their health care provider or a dietitian.



How Do You Treat an Eating Disorder?

Guidance on eating, exercise, and self-care to support full recovery.

Comprehensive care with support from a medical, mental health, and nutrition specialists.

Restoring metabolism and hunger and fullness cues. Returning to normal eating.

Positive support from friends and family. Boundaries around social media and negative influences.

The sooner you start working with a comprehensive care team to address your eating disorder behaviors, the easier it is to treat your eating disorder and fully recover.

What Does This Mean For Me?

1. Where do you think you fall on the spectrum of eating behaviors?
2. Do you ever experience the restrict-overeat cycle? If so, where could you interfere to stop the cycle from continuing?
3. What are some ways you would be comfortable making changes to your eating?

To Learn More:

National Eating Disorders Association: www.nationaleatingdisorders.org

Binge Eating Disorder Association: bedaonline.com

Center For Young Women's Health: youngwomenshealth.org/nutrition-fitness-index/

Center For Young Men's Health: youngmenshealthsite.org/nutrition-fitness-index/

Lock J, Le Grange D. *Helping Your Teenager Beat an Eating Disorder* (2015).

References:

1. Avena, Nicole M., and Miriam E. Bocarsly. "Dysregulation of brain reward systems in eating disorders: neurochemical information from animal models of binge eating, bulimia nervosa, and anorexia nervosa." *Neuropharmacology* 63.1 (2012): 87-96.
2. "Binge Eating Disorder" National Eating Disorders Association, 2018, <https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/learn/by-eating-disorder/bed>
3. "Bulimia Nervosa" National Eating Disorders Association, 2018, <https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/learn/by-eating-disorder/bulimia>