

# Emotional Appetite: The Food and Mood Connection

## Fact Sheet

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## Introduction

Several factors — including taste, cost, habit, advertisement, time, religion, availability, personal preference, environment, or emotions — influence the foods you eat, and the foods you eat influence your health. Over time, a habit of eating when you are not physically hungry could lead to weight gain and other unwanted health issues. But wait! Do you know what physical hunger feels like? Some people describe it as a feeling of emptiness in their stomachs. Others describe hunger as a growling or rumbling sound in their stomach, feeling light-headed or dizzy, being easily irritated, having low energy, finding it difficult to concentrate, or feeling nauseated. Now that you know what others say about feeling hungry, wouldn't you like to know what they say about feeling full? Fullness has been described as being satisfied, having no desire to eat another bite, feeling stuffed, and being physically uncomfortable.

OK, it's your turn. Take a moment and describe in the space below what hunger and fullness feel like to you. Be very specific.

When I am hungry, I feel:

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

When I am full, I feel:

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

Now that you know how you feel when you are hungry or full and you know what others have said about both, why do you believe you crave specific foods during a particular time of the day or when stressed?

## The Food and Mood Connection

Your mood has a lot to do with many of the foods you crave when you are not physically hungry. Eating to feed an emotion (feelings) instead of physical hunger is considered emotional eating. Stress, depression, loneliness, frustration, anxiety, and anger are just a few emotions that can trigger cravings. Although boredom and procrastination are not necessarily considered emotions, they are the most common reasons people eat when they are not hungry. Food can be used to pass time or put off doing things.

Several chemicals in the brain that affect appetite also affect moods. For example, stress causes an elevation in brain chemicals (galanin and neuropeptide Y) that increase the desire for fatty foods and carbohydrates. Stress also tends to magnify cravings; therefore, some stressed people

## Brain Chemicals Associated with Appetite

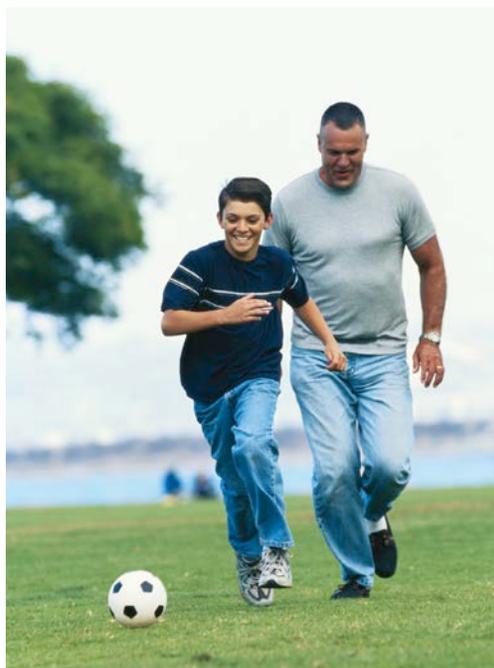
**Dopamine and norepinephrine:** Released after eating proteins (meat, poultry, seafood, beans and peas, eggs, processed soy products, nuts, and seeds). High levels increase alertness, concentration, and stress management. Low levels cause depressed feelings, irritability, and moodiness.

**Endorphins:** Released during exercise (and some researchers believe it's also released after eating sugary and fatty foods). High levels produce a euphoric or pleasurable feeling (natural "high"). Low levels increase desire to seek pleasure via junk food (cakes, candies, cookies, sweets, etc.), excess exercise, or alcohol.

**Galanin:** Triggered by stress. High levels increase the desire to eat fatty foods (creamy foods, chips, French fries, chocolate, fatty meats, etc.).

**Neuropeptide Y (NPY):** Triggered by stress. Increases desire for carbohydrate-rich foods.

**Serotonin:** Released after eating carbohydrates (whole grains, refined grains, fruits, vegetables, and sweets). High levels improve your mood, satisfy cravings, lessen depression, and increase relaxation. Low levels cause insomnia, depression, aggressive behavior, and increased food cravings.



may eat a lot of chocolate because it has carbohydrates and fat in it. The carbohydrate (sugar) in the chocolate causes a release of serotonin and endorphins, which improve the mood and provide a pleasurable feeling. The more pleasure you experience, the more you continue to indulge in whatever provides that pleasure, and in this case, it is chocolate. The fat in the chocolate satisfies the elevated galanin levels.

Emotional eating can get the best of anyone and can contribute to overeating, which can lead to obesity later in life. Here is a simple chart to help you distinguish between physical hunger and emotional hunger.

### Emotional Hunger vs. Physical Hunger

Emotional	Physical
Sudden onset	Gradual onset
Eats to feed a feeling	Eats to feed an empty stomach
Craves specific foods	No specific cravings
Eats despite fullness	Stops when full or satisfied

In the space below, identify three emotions and the foods you typically eat when they arise. For example: "Stress — chocolate-coated nuts or a juicy hamburger" or "Bored — potato chips, candy, or cheese and crackers."

Your personal triggers:

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

## Alternate Responses

It may take a while for you to learn how to distinguish between physical hunger and emotional hunger, so whenever you have a desire to eat something outside your planned meal times, do a self-check to determine how your hunger level. If you are not experiencing any of the signs you identified to describe your physical hunger, wait 10 to 15 minutes to see if the desire goes away. Cravings associated with emotional hunger may go away when you distract yourself, but symptoms associated with physical hunger will intensify if ignored. Here are a few tips you can try if you suspect you are experiencing emotional hunger.

- Exercise. The endorphins released during exercise will improve your mood. Don't forget to consult a doctor before starting an exercise program for the first time.
- Call a friend.
- Read a book.
- Do some light cleaning.
- Go for a short walk.
- Play an instrument or listen to music.
- Brush your teeth — the fresh minty taste of toothpaste will likely deter many sweet-related cravings.

## Mindful Eating the MyPlate Way

### Enjoy

- Fruits
- Lean protein foods
- Low-fat and fat-free dairy products
- Vegetables
- Whole grains



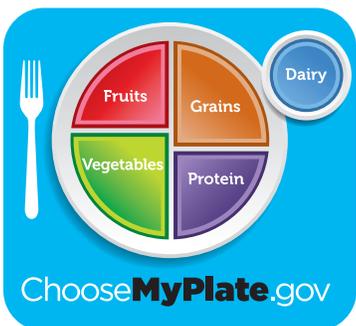
### Consume Less

- Cake
- Candy
- Chips
- Chocolate
- Cookies
- Energy drinks
- Fast foods
- Ice cream
- Pizza
- Sodas
- Sports drinks



### Drink

- 100% fruit juice
- 100% vegetable juice
- Coffee
- Low-fat or skim milk
- Tea
- Water



- Drink water — some people mistake thirst for hunger.
- Spend time with your family or friends.
- Write down your thoughts and feelings.

## Physical Activity

Incorporating physical activity into your daily lifestyle is a great way to relieve stress, as well as reduce your risk for some chronic diseases and improve your overall health and fitness. Adults are encouraged to participate in two types of physical activity (aerobic and muscle-strengthening) each week. At the minimum, adults should aim for at least 150 minutes each week of moderate-intensity aerobic activities such as brisk walking, water aerobics, or pushing a lawn mower; or 75 minutes each week of vigorous-intensity aerobic activities such as running or jogging, swimming laps, or playing basketball. Also, adults should do strengthening exercises such as weight lifting, yoga, or using resistance bands to work all major muscle groups (arms, shoulders, chest, back, abdomen, legs, and hips) two or more days each week.

As with any workout routine, don't forget to stretch during the warm-up before the activity and during the cooldown after the activity. Stretching increases flexibility and can help with relaxation because a safe stretch is both gentle and relaxing. It is best to move slowly until you feel the muscle stretch and then hold that stretch steady for 15 to 30 seconds. Do not bounce. Bouncing could increase your risk for injuries. You can repeat a stretching move three to five times. Remember to stretch within your own limits and do not push yourself or hold your breath. Breathing should be both slow and natural.

In the space below, identify at least one physical activity goal to help you improve your overall health and manage stress. Be specific. For example, "I will walk for 30 minutes after dinner 3 days a week."

My physical activity goals:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_

Use the space below to write out steps you will take when you are feeling emotional that will help you not turn to food. Remember, you know what it feels like to be hungry or full. You also know what your personal triggers are and have learned some tips to distract you when you suspect you are experiencing emotional hunger. Be specific. The more detail you provide, the better the plan will work for you.

When I am feeling emotional, I will: \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

*If you do what you've  
always done, you'll get  
what you always got.*

*Mark Twain*

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## Emotions

<b>Happy</b>		
Festive	Hopeful	Proud
Excited	Peaceful	Joyous
Enthusiastic	Glad	Pleased
Cheerful	Playful	
Lighthearted	Social	

<b>Angry</b>		
Resentful	Irritated	Bitter
Enraged	Frustrated	Fuming
Angry	Guilty	Helpless
Panicked	Alarmed	
Insecure	Confused	

<b>Anxious</b>		
Suspicious	Overbusy	Overhungry
Overwhelmed	Nervous	Fidgety
Afraid	Out of control	Impatient
Disheartened	Tired	Exhausted

<b>Hurt</b>		
Injured	Grieving	Ashamed
In pain	Suffering	Crushed
Victimized	Heartbroken	

<b>Sad</b>		
Disappointed	Pessimistic	Lonely
Unhappy	Gloomy	Sad
Depressed	Discouraged	Low
Moody	Blue	In the dumps
Rejected	Fearful	

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In each case, credit Tandalayo Kidd, Ph.D., R.D., L.P.N., and Kylie Hanson, 2011 graduate in dietetics,  
*Emotional Appetite: The Food and Mood Connection, Fact Sheet*, Kansas State University, July 2012.

Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service

MF3051

July 2012

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