How to stop overeating and lose weight effortlessly: so many of us eat too much because we've lost touch with our bodies. It is easy to slim down when you reconnect your mind and your body - Cover Story

Clare Horn

Overeating is easy to do. And when you do it, you're in good company. The average number of calories Americans eat daily has risen from 1,854 to 2,002 over the last 20 years, according to government statistics. An extra 148 calories a day translates into a 15-pound weight gain each year. Shave those extra calories, and you could lose that amount of weight. You just need to be more aware of how often and how much you eat.

Here are the four situations in which you're most likely to eat too much without noticing. To find out which one is your pitfall, keep a food diary for one week. Every time you eat, make a note of the time, your location, what you eat, and how you feel. Look for the situations in which you eat mindlessly. Then follow our experts' easy tips on how to get back in touch with your body so you can lose weight.

How Not to Overeat When You're STRESSED

Why Stress Makes You Eat Too Much: You overeat when you feel stressed to prevent yourself from feeling bad. Food becomes an easy way to distract yourself from uncomfortable feelings, at least temporarily, says John Foreyt, Ph.D., a medicine and psychiatry professor at the Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. And stress doesn't have to be negative to trigger overconsumption. Research has shown that positive stress, like anticipating a wedding, can cause you to overeat in an effort to calm your excitement.

What to Do to Stop Stressed-Out Snacking: One of the best ways to stop overeating is to take a 10-minute walk outside instead, says Foreyt. Doing so will help your body produce endorphins, feel-good brain chemicals that can counter feelings of stress.

During stressful periods, allow yourself to sit quietly and eat your meal slowly--however long that takes you, advises Geneen Roth, the Santa Cruz, Calif.-based author of When You Eat at the Refrigerator, Pull Up a Chair (Hyperion, 2001). Sitting down and taking extra time is a great way to make yourself feel calmer so you're less apt to go for seconds.
What to Do to Avoid Future Stress Binges: The key to avoiding stress-based eating is learning to distinguish stress from hunger, says Foreyt. Next time you’re hungry, notice any sensations in your stomach, throat, or mouth. Then, whenever you reach for food, pause to check for those sensations.

Once you’ve mastered distinguishing stress from hunger, focus on ways to deal with stress more effectively. Think about the cause of your stress, and take steps to reduce it. For example, if you’re missing deadlines at your job, work on time-management techniques.

Extend your 10-minute walk to an hour-long one, advises Foreyt. Adding exercise to your daily routine is a surefire way to lower your stress level.

In addition to exercise, practicing regular relaxation techniques can dramatically reduce your daily stress. Foreyt recommends doing the following 15-minute progressive relaxation technique each day: Lie down on the floor or sit in a comfortable chair. Tense and then relax each part of your body one area at a time. Start with your toes and end with your scalp.

How Not to Overeat When You’re SOCIALIZING

Why Socializing Makes You Eat TOO Much: Experts say that one of the biggest reasons you eat more when you’re socializing is that restaurants and parties tend to offer an overabundance of delicious food, making it more difficult to limit yourself to reasonable portions. You feel obliged to eat everything on your plate, no matter how much it is, says Michael J. Hewitt, Ph.D., health and healing director at Canyon Ranch Health Resort in Tucson, Ariz. And you may not recognize when you’re full while you’re busy talking with friends.

Drinking alcohol before a meal compounds the problem. Not only is alcohol an appetite stimulant, but it also makes you feel less inhibited so you’re likely to order more in restaurants and take excessive helpings at parties, says Hewitt.

What to Do Before You Go Out: Experts emphasize how important it is to anticipate the pitfalls of eating out and to take steps to avoid them. Don’t arrive feeling famished. Have a cup of tea or a piece of fruit before you go out so your stomach feels less empty and you won’t be as tempted to snack on bread or on hors d’oeuvres.
To keep eating in check at a restaurant, call before going and ask the host to fax you a menu. Peruse the selections and choose a sensible meal. Then stick to your choice once you get to the restaurant.

How to Curb Your Eating When You're Out: If you're going to drink alcohol, have it with your meal, not before. Instead, drink club soda or a glass of water with lemon or lime before eating. You'll think more clearly as you order.

The simplest way to counter the large meal sizes at some restaurants is to reduce your portions as soon as your plate arrives, recommends Diane S., an active member of Overeaters Anonymous in Boca Raton, Fla. (it's the policy of Overeaters Anonymous not to give out the complete names of its members). When the waiter brings your meal, put a third or half aside before you start eating and ask the waiter to wrap it to bring home.

When you're faced with a plate loaded with too much food, remind yourself that this isn't the only good food you're ever going to eat, advises Hewitt. It's just as wasteful to eat something you don't want as it is to throw the food away, he says. And when you overeat you have to waste time working off the extra calories.

How Not to Overeat When You're DEPRESSED

Why Depression Makes You Eat Too Much: Depression and food are related to each other on many levels, says Deborah Kesten, M.P.H., a nutrition researcher and educator in Sausalito, Calif., and author of The Healing Secrets of Food (New World Library, 2001). First, eating certain kinds of foods can make you feel low. Those high in sugar and caffeine deplete your body of B vitamins, low levels of which are linked to an increased risk of depression. And when you feel down, you're more likely to binge on high-carbohydrate foods, like bread or cookies, says Kesten, because they increase production of serotonin, a mood-regulating brain chemical. Finally, although humans evolved eating with other people, many Americans eat alone, which may increase feelings of loneliness or depression and lead to more overeating.

How to Break Blues-Based Eating Habits: It's crucial to learn to stop and ask yourself why you're reaching for food, most experts say. Realize that although food will alleviate feelings like depression, says Foreyt, the effect is only temporary. The most effective way to counter feelings of isolation when you're feeling down is to reach out to other people. Talk to a friend or family member, or write your feelings down in a journal.
You can even use your meal itself to connect with life, says Kesten. She often advises depressed clients to eat their meals with appreciation, reminding themselves of the nutrients that their food is providing as they eat. Eating mindfully and truly appreciating the food you're eating will make you less likely to want another helping.

How to Keep from Returning to Comfort Foods: Because depression is linked, in part, to a deficiency in B vitamins, it's vital to eat mostly whole foods (especially fresh fruits, vegetables, legumes, and whole grains like millet, barley, and oats), rather than processed foods, which have few B vitamins, says Kesten.

One study found that meditation actually helps prevent a vitamin deficiency, she says. Researchers at Temple University in Philadelphia found that people who meditated produced more of an enzyme called alpha-amylase, which helps your body use B vitamins. Mealtime can be the perfect time to relax. Kesten recommends the following meditation before each meal:

Sit at the table with your meal in front of you, fold your hands in your lap, inhale deeply, and exhale slowly. Do this three times with your eyes closed or focused on your food. Or say a prayer of thanks.

How Not to Overeat When YOU'RE BORED

Why Boredom Makes You Eat Too Much: You overeat when you're bored because you're looking for stimulation, says Hewitt. In today's fast-paced society, we're simply not used to downtime. Food--with its color, aroma, flavor, and ability to raise blood sugar--provides stimulation.

How to Stop Eating out of Boredom: To break the pattern of eating when you're bored, you need to switch gears and think about something other than food. "I carry around a rubber band and wear it on my wrist," says David G., a group meeting leader at Overeaters Anonymous in Del Ray Beach, Fla. "When food calls me I snap the rubber band, and it changes my thoughts."

If you're bingeing out of boredom, consciously decide to stop eating and call a friend. Talking on the phone can be a great distraction from food, says Diane S. How to Prevent Eating out of Boredom: Weight-loss experts agree about the obvious: When you're busy, you're less likely to think about food. So the trick is to find a hobby or activity that
doesn't revolve around eating, and then schedule that activity during the slow times in your daily schedule.

You may have to go as far as making a list. Roth recommends writing down non-food-related activities that stimulate your senses, like taking a bath or reading a magazine. Each day for a week, practice at least one of those activities for 15 minutes, so that you learn to indulge yourself without food.

Clare Horn is an associate editor at Natural Health. Her overeating foible is not being able to turn down dessert when eating out. She tries to order a nonfat, decaffeinated cappuccino instead.