

## Bad News for Fast Eaters

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✓ Fact Checked

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### STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Gobbling down your food too fast when you eat may not only eventually require loosening your belt; it may even contribute to the development of metabolic conditions and three of the most serious disease risks
- › 1 out of 3 adults in the U.S. have metabolic syndrome
- › The longer you chew, the more time enzymes in your saliva have to start the digestion process, and could reduce how much you eat by almost 15%, which over time could represent a significant weight loss
- › Creating a calm environment by minimizing distractions and putting down your utensils between bites are two ways you can mindfully approach eating more slowly, for both your nutritional and emotional health

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There are many things regarding food that are said to be good or bad for you, but you may not have thought of this one: Eating too fast can literally do you in, and in a few more ways than what might be obvious. When you're really hungry and what you're eating is just so amazingly good – that's a perfect recipe for eating too fast, which may present a choking hazard, but there's more than that you should be aware of.

At least one study shows that the habit of "shoveling in" one bite after another may not only require you to loosen your belt; it may even up your odds for one or more of the "big

three” cardiometabolic conditions: heart disease, diabetes and stroke, and what’s known as a “cluster” of five risk factors. Medical News Today<sup>1</sup> lists them:

- High blood pressure
- High triglycerides (the fats found in the blood)
- High fasting blood sugar
- Low high-density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol
- A large waistline

Obesity plays straight into the hands of metabolic syndrome, and more people than ever are developing the above risk factors. In fact, 1 in 3 U.S. adults have metabolic syndrome, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) reveals.<sup>2</sup> Metabolic syndrome may even jump ahead of smoking as the biggest risk factor for heart disease.<sup>3</sup>

Further, studies indicate that relative to normal weight, obesity is associated with “significantly higher” all-cause mortality.<sup>4</sup> It’s hard to believe that eating too fast could have anything to do with those statistics, but studies show it does.

## **Japanese Study Shows ‘Wolfing’ Food Down Could Be a Killer**

Cardiologist Takayuki Yamaji from Hiroshima University in Japan was the lead author of this study, which involved nearly 1,100 generally healthy male and female participants over a period of five years, the average participant being around 51 years of age. Study subjects were divided into three groups, each categorizing themselves as slow, normal or fast eaters.

Over the five years, 84 of the participants developed metabolic syndrome. The result: Your cardiometabolic health could suffer serious harm if you gobble down your food too fast. In fact, it constituted a two-times higher likelihood they would develop metabolic symptoms compared to their slower-eating cohorts, with a spread of a 2.3% likelihood for slow eaters and an 11.6% chance for the fastest ones.

The study concluded by saying, "Eating speed was associated with obesity and future prevalence of metabolic syndrome. Eating slowly may therefore ... be a crucial lifestyle factor for preventing metabolic syndrome among the Japanese."<sup>5</sup> The Economic Times November 16, 2017, quoted Yamaji:<sup>6</sup>

*"Eating more slowly may be a crucial lifestyle change to help prevent metabolic syndrome ... When people eat fast they tend not to feel full and are more likely to overeat. Eating fast causes bigger glucose fluctuation, which can lead to insulin resistance. We also believe our research would apply to a U.S. population."*

## **Counting Your Chews; Counting Your Bites**

Not many would disagree that bolting food down too quickly can contribute to indigestion, and can sometimes be downright painful. But chewing slowly helps with the mastication-to-digestion process, starting in your mouth.

Chewing more slowly helps break down your food faster, and saliva, which contains an enzyme called lingual lipase to help break down fats, helps (quite a bit) when you swallow. The longer you chew, the more time those enzymes have to start breaking down your food.

The process makes digestion easier on your stomach and small intestine, because digestion actually takes a lot of energy. Slowing down makes it easier for your intestines to absorb the nutrients in the foods you eat.

One study demonstrated the point very well: When study participants ate almonds quickly and chewed less (10 times, as opposed to 25 times or 40 times per bite), scientists found that their bodies failed to take in all the considerable nutrients almonds have to offer; the bits simply passed through and were eliminated. For those who chewed the most, the particles (hence the nutrition) were absorbed faster.<sup>7</sup>

If you want to see if chewing more thoroughly may help you eat less, you must first determine how many times you generally chew when you take a bite of food, especially

something substantial, like meat or almonds.

Also, try counting how many bites of food you take when eating, like the participants of a Brigham Young University study. Participants were asked to count how many bites of food they took when eating, and then to reduce the number of bites by 20 to 30%. Altogether, the study subjects lost an average of 4 pounds.<sup>8</sup>

Besides many potential health benefits, chewing slowly and methodically – even thoughtfully – helps you relax better so you can enjoy your meals. Rushing through just to get it down so you can continue whatever it is you're doing isn't conducive to proper digestion. You can't really even taste or enjoy the foods you eat.

## **Chewing More Slowly Can Help You Eat Less**

Remember being told you should chew each bite 32 times (or so) before swallowing? It helps your food digest better, they said. That's true, as well.

As it turns out, intentionally chewing your food better than you probably already do could have more than a few lasting benefits. The featured study indicates that people who are obese have a tendency to chew and swallow more quickly, but they also don't chew foods as thoroughly compared to people who are slim. Conversely, people who eat more slowly eat less.

The claim that it takes your brain 20 to 30 minutes to realize your stomach is already full is also true, it turns out. As Harvard Health explains, scientists will tell you that a feeling of fullness is only part of the reason why you feel satisfied after a meal. Your brain is engaged in the process, too, as it needs to get the message sent by your digestive hormones secreted by your gastrointestinal tract:<sup>9</sup>

*“Stretch receptors in the stomach are activated as it fills with food or water; these signal the brain directly through the vagus nerve that connects gut and brainstem. Hormonal signals are released as partially digested food enters the small intestine.*

*One example is cholecystokinin (CCK), released by the intestines in response to food consumed during a meal. Another hormone, leptin, produced by fat cells, is an adiposity signal that communicates with the brain about long-range needs and satiety, based on the body's energy stores. Research suggests that leptin amplifies the CCK signals, to enhance the feeling of fullness.*

*Other research suggests that leptin also interacts with the neurotransmitter dopamine in the brain to produce a feeling of pleasure after eating. The theory is that, by eating too quickly, people may not give this intricate hormonal cross-talk system enough time to work.”*

There are even studies confirming that increasing the number of times you chew each bite may reduce how much you end up eating by almost 15%. Over time, that could be a significant weight loss – or a significant weight gain on the other end of the scale.

## **Chewing as an Exercise in Mindfulness**

You've probably heard that eating to live rather than living to eat helps you adopt a mindset of thoughtfulness to what you put in your mouth. It's for the purpose of nourishing your body. But beyond that are elements of gratitude.

When you approach meals more mindfully, it will slow your mealtime process, not just for yourself, but for others – yes, even during the flurry of holiday gatherings, traveling and too much to do in the kitchen or elsewhere. Here are a few tips, inspired by Precision Nutrition:<sup>10</sup>

- Sit down at the table and minimize distractions. That means you may, tongue in cheek, have a basket on the sideboard so guests can turn down the volume and place their phones in it for the duration of the meal. Turn off the TV, even if it's on in the next room.
- Put down your utensils between bites. Breathe. Relax. Look at the faces around you and allow yourself to appreciate each one. If you're eating alone, every time you take a bite, concentrate on something you're thankful for.

- Indulge in other peoples' art of conversation. Listen. Focus on enjoying every aspect of the meal – the people sharing it with you, the taste of individual foods, the flicker of candles, the soft strains of music in the background – everything that helps you engage with appreciation for each moment will enhance the experience.
- Set aside a lengthier amount of time for meals than you typically might; 20 or 30 minutes might be enough, and adopt an attitude of calm that can cue others, even if they're unaware of it. Make enjoying every bite slowly an intentional act, whatever else might be going on.

On top of all that, if you think about it, if you're one of millions who face holidays with vague (or real) angst because you know there will be temptations and pressure on all sides, but one factoid might help you focus on your goals: Gaining 2 pounds a year doesn't sound like much – until 20 years goes by.

Especially at holiday meals, when thousands of people wonder afterward why in the world they ate so much, take a breath before picking up your fork, and pace yourself. You'll feel better, so you'll be happier, and undoubtedly healthier for it, too.

## Sources and References

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- <sup>1</sup> [Medical News Today November 14, 2017](#)
- <sup>2, 3</sup> [NIH. What Is Metabolic Syndrome? May 18, 2022](#)
- <sup>4</sup> [JAMA 2013 Jan 2;309\(1\):71-82](#)
- <sup>5</sup> [Circulation. 2017;136:A20249](#)
- <sup>6</sup> [The Economic Times November 16, 2016](#)
- <sup>7</sup> [Science Daily July 15, 2013](#)
- <sup>8</sup> [BYU News. Study: Count Your Bites. November 4, 2015](#)
- <sup>9</sup> [Harvard Health October 19, 2010](#)
- <sup>10</sup> [Precision Nutrition](#)