

good—simple choices for a better life



The 5 secrets of happy, healthy eaters

By Sarah Heeringa

Are any of us truly happy with our bodies? Does anyone believe they're eating as healthily as they should? Gluten-free, vegan and raw food diets are growing in popularity, and while obesity rates continue to climb, an insidious new eating disorder emerges. **Sarah Heeringa** surveys the experts to discover a refreshing, new and really much healthier approach

Food is an important part of a balanced diet, said satirist Fran Lebowitz. But what food? People once ate whatever was at hand and felt thankful that they weren't starving. Somewhere along the line our relationship with food became way more complicated than that. Nowadays, when we can choose to eat just about anything we want, deciding what we *should* eat causes us all sorts of problems.

Every week a fancy new food product is launched and another nutritional study goes public. Fish oil tablets, protein-enriched water, goji berries, açai powder, banana leaf extract—it's a challenge just keeping up with the latest exotic ingredients being hailed as essential to the ultimate healthy diet.

Scrutinising ingredients labels just adds to our sense of paralysis. Either they list ingredients we've never heard of, or they seem to deliberately obscure the contents. While we're trying to decide between low-fat or low-carb, food scientists have devised some 40 different types of sugar—and some food items, like kids' cereals, can combine most of them.

What you need to know to eat well, enjoy food and stay healthy throughout your life

The more we worry, the less balanced we seem to become. More than half of New Zealand's women are dissatisfied with their bodies, according to one study, and 37 percent of girls have dieted, some from the age of seven. Not that it's just a women's issue—men make up about ten

percent of people with eating disorders in New Zealand.

The good news? A balanced attitude to food—one you can realistically sustain throughout your life—incorporates not just what you eat, but how and why. Get the fundamentals sorted and many of the things we worry about, such as eating healthily and losing weight, tend to fall into line. Here's how.



1 DON'T DIET

Dieting is boring, expensive and ineffective, says Victoria Marsden, a counsellor at Auckland's Eating Difficulties Education Network (EDEN)—and who could disagree? Diets undermine and distract us, subverting our dreams and ambitions. They keep us playing the anticipation game, encouraging us to put our hopes—and our happiness—on hold until we look thin enough to really start living.

EXPERT TIPS FOR A POSITIVE RELATIONSHIP WITH FOOD

- 1 Eat when you are hungry, stop when you are full.
- 2 Steer away from encouraging, endorsing or going on diets.
- 3 View all food as morally neutral (not 'good' or 'bad').
- 4 Move away from using food as punishment or a reward.
- 5 Throw out the scales—there is very little relation between what they read and a person's health.

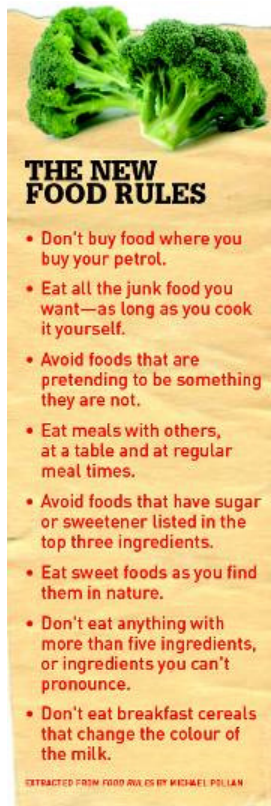
Source: Eating Difficulties Education Network, www.eden.org.nz

Some diets eliminate all carbs, others push proteins, powdered meal replacements or special supplements. The more extreme the diet, the more we're likely to fall off the wagon or slip into unhealthy cycles of bingeing and purging. Who hasn't gone on a diet, felt so miserable that they obsessed about food, and ended up eating more, rather than less? It's a cruel irony, but hardly surprising that a number of studies link dieting and restricted eating with weight gain. One recent study of more than 16,000 children aged between nine and 14 showed that over time children who dieted gained significantly more weight than children who never dieted.

Research also suggests that weight loss can be psychologically taxing and, says Marsden, combined with weight cycling (yo-yo dieting) can actually increase the risk of disease and death. What's more, dieting and restrictive eating can heighten the risk of people developing disturbed eating patterns and eating disorders(see box, right).

Being slim does not always mean being healthy, just as being overweight doesn't automatically equate with poor health. "Research suggests that there are even a few health benefits associated with being moderately overweight and that it is a lack of fitness, not fatness per se, that predicts ill-health and mortality risk," says Marsden. It's also possible that how you see yourself is not how you really are. One New Zealand study found that 80 percent of women were within normal weight ranges, but only 18 percent considered their weight to be normal.

Instead of embarking on another doomed diet, or focusing on your body's perceived flaws, try channelling that energy into better loving the one you're with. Giving up dieting and learning to love and accept yourself just as you are will give you self-confidence, better health, and a more enduring sense of wellbeing, says Marsden.



2 EAT WHEN YOU ARE HUNGRY

Why and when do we eat? Often it has more to do with boredom, habit, distraction, entertainment, comfort or reward, than hunger.

Food is a clumsy antidepressant. Comfort eating traps us in a self-reinforcing cycle: craving, temporary satisfaction, feelings of self-loathing followed by yet more craving. Treating yourself with something sweet or tasty may not be so beneficial either. It's a cruel neurological twist, but reward eating actually rewires our brains, driving us to want yet more rewarding food.

David Kessler, former head of the US Food and Drug Administration and author of *The End of Overeating*, describes this kind of eating as 'conditioned hypereating'. Cues, priming and emotional triggers stimulate 'mental ghosts'—sensory and emotional associations with food from our memories. Ads on TV or a wafting smell can trigger phantom hunger: research shows that brain activity is stimulated not only by food itself, but also by the suggestion that food is nearby.

Habit can also make us think we're hungry. In a study conducted at Holland's Wageningen University, people were given a high-sugar, high-fat snack at the same time for five consecutive mornings. For days afterwards they craved food at that same time, even though before the study they'd not snacked at that time.

Real hunger is brought on by the absence of food. It's a healthy feeling, necessary for our survival. It's important not to ignore or resist your natural appetite, regardless of your body size—the key is recognising it.

If you find yourself standing at an open fridge an hour after dinner, you can be fairly sure what has led you there isn't hunger. "A lot of what we experience as hunger is not physiological hunger ... It's a conditioned feeling of being hungry," says Doug Sellman, professor of psychiatry and addiction medicine at the Christchurch School of Medicine and the author of *Real Weight Loss*.

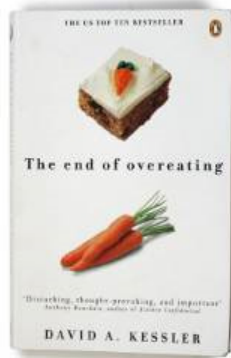
Cravings, lack of energy, headaches, light-headedness or feeling low may not be signs of hunger. You might just be cold. Sellman suggests adding another layer of clothing, going for a walk or taking a hot bath. If you're bored or lonely, put on some favourite music, go for a walk or have a conversation with someone you like. One tried and true test: if you're not hungry enough to eat an apple, you're not hungry.



3 EAT FOOD

The suggestion to 'eat food' sounds simple—but many of the items filling supermarket shelves aren't so much food as edible food-like substances, says Michael Pollan, bestselling author of *In Defence of Food* and new book *Food Rules*. Much that passes for food is highly processed, designed by food scientists, and contains ingredients no normal person would keep in the pantry. It's loaded with chemicals to extend shelf life, make old food look fresh and to get you to eat more.

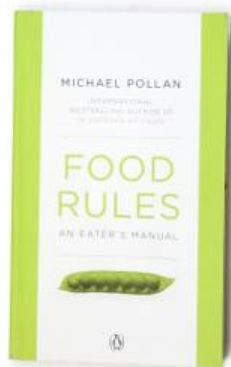
"For most of human history we survived on unadorned animal and vegetable products," says Kessler. "Now we mostly eat optimised foods that bear little resemblance to what exists in nature."



THE END OF OVEREATING

David Kessler Penguin 2009, \$30

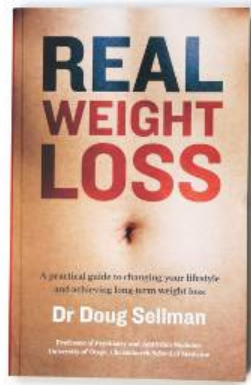
The former head of the US Food and Drug Administration explains how our bodies and minds are changed by eating foods loaded with sugar, fat and salt—and details strategies for re-programming out-of-control eating habits.



FOOD RULES

Michael Pollan Penguin 2010, \$20

The international bestseller *In Defence of Food* took a long hard look at the modern Western diet and waded through a blizzard of nutritional information to establish what a modern healthy diet looks like. Pollan's latest book distils these guidelines into bite-size portions—and brings a refreshingly light touch to the often-earnest subject of what to eat.



REAL WEIGHT LOSS

Doug Sellman Craig Potton 2008, \$25

From his work as professor of psychiatry and addiction medicine at the Christchurch School of Medicine, Sellman knows only too well how difficult it is to change eating behaviour. Motivated by his own weightloss, he details a straightforward five-point strategy for permanent weight loss and an improved quality of life.

Processed food is so easy to eat that food industry insiders sometimes refer to it as “adult baby food”. Processing removes elements like fibre from whole food to make it easier to chew and swallow. Home-made coleslaw takes time and energy to chew; chopped fine and softened with a high-fat dressing, it slips down. The ingredients in a processed meat patty have been chopped, blended and glued together with binders, flavour enhancers and other additives. In this pre-chewed form, the patty goes down so quickly that it overrides the body’s signals that would normally tell us when we are full.

The typical Western diet involves lots of processed foods and meats, lots of added fats and sugar, lots of refined grains ... lots of everything except vegetables, says Pollan. Countless studies the world over have shown that populations who eat this way invariably demonstrate high rates of obesity, type- 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and cancer.

Eat foods made from ingredients that you can picture in their raw state or growing in nature, suggests Pollen. If it came from a plant, eat it; if it was made in a plant, don’t. And remember, if it arrived through the window of your car, it’s not food.

4 EAT FOOD THAT IS SATISFYING

We don’t need food science to tell us that the most appetising foods press all our buttons: salty, sweet, spicy and creamy—especially in a varied textural combination. Crispy hot fish and chips, with creamy aioli or a sweet and sour dipping sauce, anyone?

Most of us can get away with eating food loaded with salt and fat, provided it doesn’t make up the bulk of our diet. But the more highly processed a food is, the less lasting the satisfaction it delivers. One University of Sussex study found that some people felt even hungrier in the middle of such a meal than at the beginning.

Eating to be satisfied is different from eating till you’re full. Sweet food and highly refined carbs such as pasta are known to provide a quick hit, followed by a crash. An hour or so after eating, we’re going to be more sustained if we’ve dined on foods that occur in nature: complex carbohydrates such as whole grains and some vegetables, protein and a small amount of fat.

Knowing how much to eat and when to stop is just as important. Kessler calls this ‘just-right eating’. Feedback signals from the stomach come long after you’ve eaten, he says, so it pays to figure out what a ‘just-right’ meal or snack looks like.

Ever taken a chip from a packet, only to be unable to stop eating until they’ve all gone? The more food is loaded with layers of fat, salt and sugar the more impossible it is to resist. It’s deliberately designed to be that way, says Kessler. Convenience food is engineered to be hyper-palatable. In plain English: eating foods high in sugar, fat and salt makes us eat more foods high in sugar, fat and salt. Fat, salt, sugar and flavourings overstimulate the brain’s reward pathways, short-circuit the body’s self-regulating mechanisms and lead people to eat way beyond their needs.

The result? Like compulsive gamblers, many people find they can’t stop eating after a few bites of hyper-palatable food, says Kessler. In Christchurch, Sellman and colleagues are trialling the effectiveness of programmes normally reserved for alcohol and drug addictions to treat people who simply can’t seem to stop eating.

5 MAKE MEALS AN EVENT

How you eat may have as much bearing on your health as what you eat. Just look at the French, says Pollan. They eat all sorts of supposedly lethal fatty foods, washed down with red wine, yet remain healthier, slimmer and with a slightly longer life expectancy. But French people seldom snack, eat small portions from small plates, don't go back for second helpings, and eat most of their food at long, leisurely meals shared with other people. "The rules governing these behaviours may matter more than any magic nutrient in their diet," says Pollan.

Culture, table manners and other unspoken guidelines help determine whether our meals are enriching experiences or fragmented and solitary. Eat at a table, suggests Pollan, not a desk, in the car or in front of the TV. Even if you are grabbing a quick sandwich at work, eating slowly and savouring each bite will ensure it is much more satisfying, says Marsden. If eating alone, try sniffing your food as you might a fine wine, or close your eyes after taking your first mouthful to better concentrate on the taste.

When at home, take the trouble to set the table with a jug of chilled water and put food into attractive serving dishes. Turns out table manners matter too. Don't stuff in large mouthfuls, says Sellman—take time to chew, and finish one mouthful before you load your fork again. If it helps, try switching to smaller plates and cutlery. One surefire way to enhance the enjoyment of your food is to avoid rich snacks between meals. To paraphrase a writer from the 15th century, hunger is the best sauce.



Orthorexia

WHEN HEALTHY TURNS UNHEALTHY

Ashley is a trim, fit 29-year-old who enjoys cooking and is very interested in healthy eating. But the more Ashley learns about nutrition, the more foods are found wanting. A switch to lowfat foods is followed by the careful exclusion of all 'bad' fats. Then all processed foods are excluded—plus anything artificially flavoured. Next red meat is eliminated.

Further research leads Ashley to go strictly organic. Dairy products and gluten are next to go. Invitations to dine with friends are declined in favour of sticking to the 'right' foods. Grocery shopping is time-consuming and fraught—and back home, more time is spent searching for recipes combining an ever-decreasing pool of ingredients. When Ashley finally books an appointment at a clinic, around 85 percent of his time is being spent cooking, shopping or simply thinking about food.

Ashley is a man, and he's typical of an increasing number of males who present to EDEN in Auckland, says counsellor Victoria Marsden.

"Yo-yo eating, restricting, eating past fullness, body dysmorphia ... we see men and women of all shapes and sizes afflicted with eating difficulties ranging right across the spectrum—including an increasing number of people who have become fixated on healthy eating."

The term 'orthorexia' was coined by Californian doctor Steven Bratman in 1997 to describe this fixation with "righteous eating". Orthorexic eating is ordered by strict rules, and thinking about healthful foods and planning meals take several hours per day.

Regimens vary: some eliminate all artificial additives, fats or sugar; others allow only raw food or fruit. One survey of students by the University of Rome found that 6.9 percent exhibited orthorexic behaviour, with a higher prevalence among men.

Orthorexics can be perfectionists, driven by the ideal of food that is nutritious and pure, continually refining and restricting their diets. Sufferers place the virtue of the food above the pleasure of eating it, and risk social isolation in order to follow strict eating plans. They may also be keen to talk about the benefits of their regimens, and may feel their dietary paths make them better people. Orthorexia can be treated, but sufferers may not think they need any help.

Living in the shadow of an eating difficulty limits your enjoyment of life and hampers your ability to achieve your goals. If you think you might be struggling with orthorexia (or any other eating-related difficulty), don't be afraid to take the first step and ask for support—from those around you or from a health professional that you trust.

To contact the Eating Difficulties Education Network (EDEN), phone 09-378 9039 or visit www.eden.org.nz

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