



## Conscious Eating for Perfect Weight

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What is perfect weight? It is tempting to think that there is a certain number on a scale that defines a person's "perfect" weight. The problem with this, as many recognize, is that even when they reach their goal weight, they still don't feel healthy and vital. On the other hand, some people may not meet the criteria for "ideal weight" by some standards, yet they still feel vibrant, healthy, and happy. Perfect weight isn't a number. It isn't about how someone looks. Instead, it is a natural state of balance, where we feel healthy and energetic.

The healing system of [Ayurveda](#) teaches that we each have a unique mind-body type, known as our dosha, that guides how we look and feel when we're healthy. Since our individual state of health and balance is different from everyone else's, the perfect weight for each of us will vary, and no single dietary regimen will be appropriate for everyone.

According to Ayurveda, by understanding our true nature, strengthening our connection to ourselves, and living in balance with our natural rhythms, our perfect weight is revealed. This knowledge doesn't come from an external source, but comes from within each and every one of us. Once we understand this, we can begin to listen to our inner intelligence and engage in practices that strengthen our mind-body-spirit connection and lead us towards the weight that is ideal for us.

### 3 Keys to Healthy, Mindful Eating

From an Ayurvedic perspective, there are three vital factors to consider when it comes to healthy eating and optimal weight: 1.) your digestive power, 2.) your doshic type, and 3.) conscious eating. Let's look at each of these elements in more detail.

#### 1.) Optimizing Our Digestion

The first, and possibly the most important, aspect to evaluate is the state of your digestion. Before considering the kinds of food that you're eating, you want to find out whether your ability to digest

that food is optimal. In Ayurveda, the term agni, or “digestive fire,” refers to the body’s ability to break down and subsequently absorb and utilize the nutrients and energy that you ingest.

There is an ancient Ayurvedic saying that states that if your agni is strong, you can turn poison into nectar, but if your agni is weak, you will turn nectar into poison. In other words, if your agni is weak, you can eat very nutritious food, but your body will be unable to digest and absorb it. Just as a weak campfire produces a lot of smoke and leaves behind pieces of charred wood, a weak digestive fire can’t completely digest your food, which may then accumulate as toxic residue in the body. Alternatively, if your agni is like a roaring campfire, it will completely “cook” or break down the food that you eat so that it can nurture your health and vitality.

I have seen patients who were eating a healthy, low-calorie diet and exercising appropriately with a combination of cardio, yoga, and weights, yet they were unable to lose even a pound after months of this regime. More important, they weren’t feeling healthy despite “doing everything right.” In these cases, we need to explore what factors may be weakening a person’s agni. By addressing these underlying issues, we can help the body restore its natural balance and health and arrive at the perfect weight for that individual.

**Here are a few of the major sources that weaken agni and what you can do to address them:**

### **Excessive Stress**

Having too much stress in your life keeps your body in a heightened state of “fight-or-flight” and weakens your digestive fire. When we are in the fight-or-flight mode, our body releases stress hormones such as cortisol to deal with whatever immediate stress we are presented with. Cortisol stimulates our appetite in anticipation of needing more energy, and it also stimulates a cascade of hormonal reactions that cause us to store excess energy around our abdomen in the form of fatty tissue.

Fight-or-flight is an ancient biological mechanism that helped our ancestors protect themselves from life-threatening threats such as saber-toothed tigers. However, in today’s modern world, unless we serve in the military, police force, or some similar occupation, we rarely face major physical threats in our environment. Yet our body continues to gear up with the same flight-or-flight response to much smaller events that violate our sense of safety – such as someone cutting us off on the highway or being passed over for a promotion. Unless we find adaptive ways to manage stress, over time this chronic stress may lead to chronic disease states, and a change in how we metabolize and store energy.

Activities or practices that reduce stress, such as [meditation](#) and yoga, will increase your ability to digest and incorporate food properly into your body. Engaging in any form of exercise that you enjoy, as well as being out in nature, can also decrease the stress reaction in the body. By reducing stress, these practices also strengthen your agni.

## Overeating

When we overeat, we are physically interfering with our stomach's ability to move the food around and break it down. In addition, we are giving our body more calories than it needs, which weakens our digestive fire. This is similar to putting too much wood on a fire and "smothering" it. Current research is showing that simple "overnutrition" or eating more than our body needs causes inflammation in the part of the brain that regulates hunger, the hypothalamus. This can then lead to an increase in appetite, as well as the release of hormones that promote weight gain.

There are many reasons why we may overeat. Some people have learned from childhood that food can soothe the emotions, and this leads to emotional eating. Managing our emotional reactions to events in our lives in a healthy way will reduce our need to eat for emotional reasons.

Our cultural and social conditioning may also contribute to overeating. Many of us were taught as we were growing up that we needed to "clean our plate," or that it was rude to refuse food that someone offered to us – even if we weren't hungry. Today we may continue to follow the "eating rules" we learned so long ago. Many social events revolve around food and can easily lead to overnutrition. Others may find themselves eating out of boredom or habit (as in mindlessly eating large tubs of popcorn at movies). Identifying and changing these "eating rules" that aren't based on your body's need for nutrition can minimize overeating.

## Honoring Your Appetite

Ayurveda teaches us to honor our appetite and to eat only when we are hungry – when we actually need the nutrients and the energy contained in food. As opposed to current Western medical trends in treating obesity, which focus on developing more pharmaceutical options, Ayurveda focuses on honoring the natural cues of our body. However, many people have learned to have a negative relationship with their appetite, and common weight-loss strategies focus on appetite suppressants. This is a misguided approach because "diet pills" tend to blunt our body's signals for nutrition, as well as hamper our digestive process.

In the past I sometimes prescribed appetite suppressants to patients thinking that I was helping them. In reality, although some were able to lose some weight initially, the results were never long-lasting. When my patients eventually stopped taking appetite suppressants their body gave them signals to eat more, to catch up on the nutrition they had deprived themselves of. In the end, because we were not focusing on understanding and working with their appetite, the weight came back.

Just as appetite suppressants don't work in the long term, popular diets don't provide long-lasting results because they aren't based on body-centered awareness but on a temporary and often overly severe restriction of calories. While people may lose weight on a diet by limiting their food intake, they ultimately gain back the weight and then some because they haven't developed healthy eating patterns and learned to tune into their body's true needs.

## **Tuning into Your Body**

Listening to your body's cues and eating only until you are physically satisfied will help prevent overeating and strengthen your digestion. Becoming conscious of when you eat too much and why is the first step. I have had many patients over the years who have been able to lose weight and keep it off simply by listening to their body's signals of fullness, and eating only when they are hungry.

To increase your awareness of your body's true hunger signals, use this technique: Whenever you're considering eating, place your hand on your abdomen and bring your awareness to your stomach. Then ask yourself, "On a scale of 1–10, (with 1 being absolutely ravenous and 10 uncomfortably stuffed) how hungry am I?" Don't eat until your appetite reaches a 2 or 3, and stop eating when you reach a 7. It's important to leave your stomach about one-quarter to one-third empty at the end of a meal. This will make your digestive system work more efficiently. Also, if you leave a little room in your stomach, you will feel more energetic, light, and buoyant.

## **What Are You Hungry for?**

Practices that strengthen our mind-body connection help us to understand what hunger truly feels like. We often misinterpret the physical sensations that accompany unmet emotional needs. We interpret the feeling "in the pit of our stomach" as hunger, rather than identifying it as anxiety or fear. This can lead to emotional eating, or soothing our emotional needs with food. When we learn to identify our emotional state more accurately and find out what we are really hungry for, we can stop using food to self-soothe and find more satisfying, conscious ways to fill our emotional needs.

One of the most powerful practices for stopping compulsive overeating and getting in touch with our true appetites is meditation. When you meditate, you connect to your essential nature and expand your capacity for self-referral, which is looking within and taking actions based on your internal value system.

## **2.) Eat for Your Mind-Body Type**

Once you have considered the strength of your digestive power, next consider the foods that you're eating. In Ayurveda, there are three mind-body types, or doshas, and the types of foods that are optimal for you depend upon your individual dosha. The foods that keep one person in balance and at their ideal weight may not be the right choices for someone with a different dosha. The doshas explain why some people can eat a hot, spicy meal and feel fine, while others could eat the same meal and experience heartburn or indigestion.

Each dosha has a different type of metabolism, which affects how we process the foods that we eat. Two people can eat the same foods and have the same activity level, but look and feel quite different. One dosha may naturally be able to handle a heavier type of food, while another dosha may be more in balance with lighter foods. When you are eating according to your individual mind-

body type, it is easier to keep the body in balance. [Learn more about your dosha here and take the Dosha Quiz here.](#)

Ayurveda divides food into six categories based on their taste and the effect they have on our bodies. The six tastes are sweet, sour, salty, pungent, bitter, and astringent. By incorporating all six tastes into each meal, our bodies feel satisfied, often with much less than we are used to eating. When we are satisfied, our body does not give us signals to look for more food, and cravings begin to disappear. We no longer feel the need to snack because our body feels satisfied with the meal we have eaten. Ayurveda also offers specific guidance on how each of the six tastes affects the doshas and which tastes to favor depending on your doshic type. In addition, by eating a variety of foods, especially densely pigmented foods of all colors and from all six taste categories, we give our bodies all of the vitamins, minerals, and nutrients that it needs.

[Learn more about the six tastes in the Chopra Center's On-line Library.](#)

### **3.) Paying Attention to How We Eat**

In addition to choosing foods that nurture our mind-body type, Ayurveda teaches that how we eat is very important as well. Our digestion is most effective when we eat consciously or mindfully and in a relaxing, peaceful environment. Unfortunately, in our fast-paced society we have developed eating practices that interfere with our ability to achieve our own healthy weight. We eat too quickly, and on the run. We are taught that multi-tasking is the key to success, so we often eat while we are working, or while our attention is on things other than our food. We also haven't learned the value of silence, so we eat with the radio or TV on, or while we're on the computer. All of these activities interfere with our body's ability to fully experience eating.

When we slow down and pay attention to eating, this is called conscious eating. When we eat mindfully instead of mindlessly, we notice the signals that our body is sending us that we may not have recognized before. We learn to identify the signs of satiety, or when our body has had enough food, so we don't overeat. We also are more satisfied after meals, because we have taken the time to actually taste and appreciate the food. After enjoying and fully experiencing a meal, we will not feel the need to snack later.

#### **Eating in Tune with Our Body's Rhythms**

Once we become familiar with what hunger feels like, we will notice that our appetite cycles according to our body's natural rhythms. We feel hungriest in the middle of the day when we are most active. Ayurveda recommends that we eat our biggest meal of the day between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m., when our digestive power is strongest and we have the greatest need for energy. A lighter meal in the evening is more aligned with our natural cycle of slowing down. It's best to eat dinner several hours before you go to bed to give your body time to digest before settling into sleep. Many people notice that eating a meal later in the evening gives the body a feeling of heaviness, since our natural ability to digest is weaker at that time.

Ayurveda offers us many useful principles that we can use in our efforts to achieve the right balance for ourselves. Through practices such as meditation and yoga, we begin to enter a state of self-referral and can spontaneously make better choices for ourselves. We stop reacting to external cues that govern our behavior, such as messages from the media or other sources outside ourselves. Instead, we begin to effortlessly move toward behaviors that are right for us, governed by our own internal intelligence. We can then discover for ourselves what our own “perfect weight” really is.

\*Note: The information in this article is intended for your educational use only and is not a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical condition and before undertaking any diet, fitness, or other health program.

## About the Author

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Sheila Patel, M.D. is a board-certified family physician who is passionate about bringing holistic healing practices into the Western medical system. Before coming to the Chopra Center, she practiced full-spectrum family medicine, from prenatal care and deliveries to ER coverage and primary care for all ages. As the Chopra Center’s Medical Director, she offers integrative medical consultations that combine the best in conventional medicine with the wisdom of Ayurveda. Her special interests include preventive medicine and mind-body medicine, with an emphasis on Ayurveda.

- See more at: <http://www.chopra.com/ccl/conscious-eating-for-perfect-weight#sthash.jfpPUcx5.UiEhPMIj.dpuf>