

Why there aren't 'good' and 'bad' foods: Understanding the all-foods-fit approach

'I was so "bad" yesterday – I had dessert twice'.

'I'm going to be 'good' today so I can eat pizza tonight'.

'I've eaten so much "junk"'.

'She is so disciplined – she only eats "clean" food'.

Do any of the above comments ring a bell? Chances are you're nodding your head. That's because we live in a society steeped in [diet culture](#), where these kinds of statements are totally normal and it's societally acceptable to demonise certain 'bad', 'unhealthy' foods or even whole food groups (like carbs) and place a moral stamp of approval on the 'healthy' or 'good' ones.

As an eating disorder dietitian who takes a non-diet approach to nutrition, I've had countless conversations with clients who are full of shame about their food choices and feel like they've done something terribly wrong by eating a fast-food meal or a piece of cake. But it's not just people who struggle with eating disorders who feel this way. In fact, [research](#) shows that the general population also tends to view food through a lens of morality, specifically seeing more energy-dense (AKA higher calorie) foods as 'impure' and low-energy foods as 'pure'.

Fortunately, a new approach has been slowly emerging over the last few decades - an approach to eating that removes shame and morality from food and helps us reclaim our power and pleasure from diet culture. This approach is known as 'all-foods-fit'.

What is an 'all-foods-fit' approach?

Taking an all-foods-fit approach to nutrition means allowing room for a wide variety of foods in your meals and snacks with nothing off-limits (unless you have a food allergy). This includes foods that society tends to deem



'All foods contain nutrition, because all foods provide calories, which are converted into energy that fuels your body'.

– Aleta Storch, RDN

‘unhealthy’, but what I call ‘fun foods’. It means creating a balance between nutrient-dense foods and fun foods that feels right for you. ‘Some foods contain specific nutrients that are beneficial for various aspects of physical health, but that doesn’t mean that foods lower in nutrient density are inherently non-nutritious’, explains Aleta Storch, registered dietitian nutritionist (RDN). ‘All foods contain nutrition, because all foods provide calories, which are converted into energy that fuels your body’.

Plus, an all-foods-fit approach recognises that food can be more than physical sustenance. ‘Some foods can promote other types of health, like mental, emotional, relational, financial health’, Storch adds. ‘Often, these are the foods that get labelled by diet culture as “bad” or “junk”, but if we lean into the philosophy that all foods have the capacity to support one or more aspects of our health, then all foods can fit into a diet that promotes health’.

The slow push towards the uncoupling of morality and food choices began in the 1990s when [heroin chic](#) was in, fat was out, and highly restrictive diets like Atkins and Zone were booming. Perhaps in response to such alarming trends, the all-foods-fit approach arose within [intuitive eating](#) and other non-diet movements. ‘There is room in our diet for pizza and ice cream, just as there is room for kale and quinoa’, says Claire Rifkin MS, RDN. ‘We can eat any of those foods without shame, guilt, or categorising them as a “good” or “bad” food choice’.

How an all-foods-fit approach helps in eating disorder recovery

Taking an all-foods-fit approach can help anyone who lives in our diet-focused society. Being intentional about embracing all foods instead of giving into socially normalised rules (like avoiding desserts, skipping carbs or always choosing salad over chips) can make life more joyful, fulfilling and peaceful for anyone. ‘All-foods-fit, when adopted by the general population, can be freeing and healing for many, and decrease the fear-mongering about certain foods’, says Rebecca Jaspán, a registered dietitian (RD) specialising in eating disorders. ‘It allows food to be just food’. Plus, a 2022 [study](#) of women at university showed that intuitive eating interventions, like allowing the consumption of all foods, may help to reduce the risk of disordered eating and increase body appreciation.

Research also supports using an all-foods-fit approach in eating disorder treatment. A 2022 [study](#) of an intuitive eating programme at a treatment centre found a link between positive treatment outcomes and intuitive eating abilities, like incorporating all foods. [Another study](#), this one looking at university students, showed an association between using intuitive eating principles, like giving oneself full permission to eat all foods, and improved eating disorder symptoms, as compared to using behaviours like self-weighing and calorie counting.

Personally, I know that if I’d never made peace with all foods in my recovery, I’d still be stuck in my eating disorder. In my practice, I find that when clients reach a point of [neutrality](#) and removal of morality around food, they are then able to truly step into full recovery. If they still keep certain foods off limits or have rules around how or when they can eat them, it makes achieving complete freedom impossible. ‘The goal when using an all-foods-fit modality in eating disorder recovery should always be to reduce the associated shame and stigma of certain foods’, Rifkin shares.

One way to do this is by creating an inventory of off-limits foods and working on integrating each food at a pace that feels doable. Storch also points out the value of incorporating science into the process: ‘At the end of the day, our bodies cannot distinguish glucose in a chocolate bar from glucose in an apple. Do we get additional nutrients from the apple that we don’t get from the chocolate? Absolutely’, she explains. ‘But we also get nutrients from the chocolate bar that we don’t get from the apple, and if a chocolate bar is a source of joy and relaxation, but the apple is a source of stress or rigidity, then the chocolate bar is actually the healthier choice’. While it’s hard work, our brains are malleable, and with repetition, time, and patience, they can be rewired to see all foods neutrally.

Benefits of an all-foods-fit approach

The all-foods-fit approach has benefits for people across the spectrum of food relationships: those with eating disorders, those struggling with disordered eating, and those who simply eat food and live in our society. Here are some of the benefits of embracing it:

1. You take back your power from diet culture.

Dieting and weight loss is a multi-million pound industry that profits off people feeling shameful

and anxious about food choices. Adopting the all-foods-fit approach helps to free you from diet culture and lets you eat what you want without feeling shame or anxiety or the need to compensate afterwards.

- 2. You improve your mental health.** When you spend less energy worrying about avoiding foods or what you ate, you have new mental space and energy for the more meaningful aspects of life. As Storch says, the all-foods-fit approach ‘makes life easier and more enjoyable’. In fact, [research](#) shows associations between intuitive eating (which applies all-foods-fit) and better psychological health, [including](#) less preoccupation with the body and fewer depressive symptoms. This approach can also be particularly beneficial in challenging black and white thinking about food, which is a common pattern that often comes up in eating disorder recovery, Rifkin explains.
- 3. You heal your relationship with your body.** With some time under your belt practising the all-foods-fit approach, you may notice better [body image](#) and higher self-esteem. This makes sense, because getting rid of food rules increases your confidence in your ability to make the best food choices for yourself. In fact, a 2021 [meta-analysis](#) found a connection between adults who practised intuitive eating and improved body image, self-esteem and overall wellbeing.
- 4. You lower your risk of developing an eating disorder.** For those without eating disorders, embracing an all-foods-fit approach will act as a protector of sorts and could lower your risk of developing disordered eating behaviours, according to a [2020 study](#).
- 5. You improve your physical health.** I’m often asked, ‘But how is eating everything, including pizza and chips, healthy?’ In my practice, I notice that when my clients have rules around their food choices, they often find themselves falling into unhealthy patterns, such as the binge-restrict cycle. Counterintuitively, their rules make them preoccupied with the off-limits fun foods, and they become unable to hear their body’s needs clearly. Once all foods are fair game, they’re typically able to find a natural balance between fun and nutrient-dense foods. That’s likely why all-foods-fit practices like intuitive eating are associated with [increased](#)

[diet quality, higher fruit and vegetable intake](#), and [improved metabolic indicators](#) like blood pressure and cholesterol.

- 6. You connect to your intuition.** Food rules create mental noise and sever your connection to your body, which is your intuition’s home. ‘When you approach food neutrally, you can use internal cues [like hunger and fullness](#) to decide what foods make you feel good physically, mentally and emotionally’, Jaspan explains.

Tips for introducing the all-foods-fit approach into your life

Adopting an all-foods-fit approach isn’t as simple as just deciding to do so. For many people, it takes a more deliberate and intentional approach, often with the support of a registered dietitian. Here are some tips for getting started:

- 1. Consider the ‘why’ for yourself.** Take time to explore how adopting an all-foods-fit mentality will benefit your life. ‘Consider how foods that you label as “bad” or “junk” might support areas of health beyond just the physical’, Storch suggests. Perhaps it’s having more mental space with less food preoccupation, finding more pleasure in life, or having more freedom and less anxiety when travelling or out at restaurants.
- 2. Take an inventory of thoughts and rules.** ‘I recommend starting to get curious about your thoughts and feelings around food’, Rifkin says. Without judgment, take stock of all your food beliefs and rules that are getting in your way. If it feels helpful, write them down and check in with them as you progress.
- 3. Give yourself permission.** When you’re ready (enough), start to incorporate foods that were previously off limits with full, unconditional permission. ‘No foods are off limits or saved for special occasions or “cheat days”’, Jaspan adds. ‘If you find it feels scarier or more difficult than you imagined, slow down and go at a pace that feels more realistic to you. With some of my clients who have several “fear foods”, we create a fear food hierarchy, with the hardest foods at the top, a bit easier in the middle, and easiest at the bottom. We start at the bottom and work our way up over time.’

- 4. Have coping skills in place.** It can feel scary to let go of food rules and start eating foods that were once off limits. Often, such food rules function as maladaptive coping skills to help numb or deal with hard emotions or life situations, so you may need to incorporate adaptive coping tools at eating times to help manage tough emotions that surface. Some examples include breathing exercises, grounding practices, journaling, self-compassion practices, confiding in a therapist or safe person, and listening to music.
- 5. Be consistent.** Once you begin incorporating foods that you used to restrict, be sure to keep having them often. Because the brain may perceive such foods as a threat, it's only after eating them regularly that you can make peace and feel in control around them. There's no hard

and fast rule about what defines consistency, but it's helpful to have the food at least every other day for a month or so, followed by at least a few times a week for a few months, and eventually whenever you want the food.

- 6. Get support.** 'If you find yourself experiencing significant difficulty in introducing new foods, or if feelings of shame become overwhelming, it may be beneficial to seek support from a licensed mental health professional or a dietitian', Rifkin says. And if your difficulty stems from disordered eating or an eating disorder, seeking this support becomes even more important – challenging the distorted thought and behaviour patterns of an eating disorder is not something you can do on your own or through sheer will.



If you're concerned about your diet and food rules, it's important to talk to your healthcare provider or an eating disorder specialist to get a professional assessment and the help you need. [Booking a free consultation](#) with an eating disorder expert is a quick and convenient way to get started on the road to food freedom.

Sources

Lakritz C, Tournayre L, Ouellet M, Iceta S, Duriez P, Masetti V, Lafraire J. Sinful foods: Measuring implicit associations between food categories and moral attributes in anorexic, orthorexic, and healthy subjects. *Frontiers in Nutrition*. 2022;9.

Intuitive eating. [Homepage](#).

Katcher J, Suminski R, Pacanowski C. Impact of an intuitive eating intervention on disordered eating risk factors in female-identifying undergraduates: A randomized waitlist-controlled trial. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. 2022;19(19):12049.

Richards P, Crowton S, Berrett M, Smith M, Passmore K. Can patients with eating disorders learn to eat intuitively? A 2-year pilot study. *Eating Disorders*. 2017;25(2):99-113.

Romano K, Swanbrow Becker A, Colgary C, Magnuson A. Helpful or harmful? The comparative value of self-weighing and calorie counting versus intuitive eating on the eating disorder symptomatology of college students. *Eating and Weight Disorders – Studies on Anorexia, Bulimia and Obesity*. 2018;23(6):841-848.

Burnette C, Hazzard V, Larson N, Hahn S, Eisenberg M, Neumark-Sztainer D. Is intuitive eating a privileged approach? Cross-sectional and longitudinal associations between food insecurity and intuitive eating. *Public Health Nutrition*. 2023;1-25.

Hazzard V, Telke S, Simone M, Anderson L, Larson N, Neumark-Sztainer D. Intuitive eating longitudinally predicts better psychological health and lower use of disordered eating behaviors: findings from EAT 2010-2018. *Eating and Weight Disorders – Studies on Anorexia, Bulimia and Obesity*. 2020;26(1).

Carrard I, Rothen S, Rodgers R. Body image concerns and intuitive eating in older women. *Appetite*. 2021;164:105275.

Linardon J, Tylka T, Fuller-Tyszkiewicz M. Intuitive eating and its psychological correlates: A meta-analysis. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*. 2021;54(7).

Hensley-Hackett K, Bosker J, Keefe A, Reidlinger D, Warner M, D'Arcy A, Utter J. Intuitive eating intervention and diet quality in adults: A systematic literature review. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*. 2022;54(12):1099-1115.

Christoph M, Hazzard V, Järvelä-Reijonen E, Hooper L, Larson N, Neumark-Sztainer D. Intuitive eating is associated with higher fruit and vegetable intake among adults. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*. 2021;53(3):240-245.

Van Dyke N, Drinkwater E. Review article relationships between intuitive eating and health indicators: literature review. *Public Health Nutrition*. 2013;17(8):1757-1766.



This programme should not be used for emergency or urgent care needs. In an emergency, call 999 or go to the nearest A&E. This programme is not a substitute for a doctor's or professional's care. Consult your GP for specific health care needs, treatment or medication. Due to the potential for a conflict of interest, legal consultation will not be provided on issues that may involve legal action against Optum or its affiliates, or any entity through which the caller is receiving these services directly or indirectly (e.g. employer or health plan). This programme and its components may not be available in all regions or for all group sizes and is subject to change. Coverage exclusions and limitations may apply.

© 2024 Optum, Inc. All rights reserved. WF15047674 333028-112024 OHC