

Hunger is tricky. Yes, you need to eat when your belly growls, but eat the wrong thing and your hunger returns with a vengeance. Add stress and lack of sleep and you amplify it even more. The good news: this beast can be tamed.

By Holly Pevzner

Illustrations by Serge Bloch

Hunger is your body's natural way of telling you that you need fuel. It's primitive. And the instinctual drive to satisfy your hunger is essential for survival. Unfortunately, somewhere between our cavelady days and the invention of the reduced-fat cookie, our ability to recognize—and successfully quell—our hunger has gone haywire. A big part of the problem? Hormones—namely insulin, leptin and ghrelin. “They’re a central component of how hungry we feel,” says David Ludwig, M.D., Ph.D., a professor of nutrition at Harvard’s T.H. Chan School of Public Health and author of *Always Hungry?*

The foods we eat (and don’t eat) have an overwhelming say in how hungry we feel. “Processed carbohydrates are the worst,” says Ludwig. When you eat something like a plain bagel with fat-free cream cheese, it gets rapidly digested, causing blood glucose levels to surge. It offers you a swift kick of a.m. energy, fueling your muscles and brain all while satisfying your hunger—but only temporarily. At the same time, an unpleasant hormonal subplot

unfolds. The processed carbs and nonfat cream cheese (both of which are low in fat and protein) cause your blood sugar to rise quickly and so your body pumps out high levels of the hormone insulin, which signals your cells to suck up all the calories and glucose entering the bloodstream to control the sugar influx. As insulin hustles to bring your blood sugar back to “normal” levels, it overshoots and your blood sugar dips below normal. Your brain notices that there are now too few

calories in the bloodstream and sends a signal that you need more fuel. Unfortunately, the brain has a blind spot when it comes to knowing what’s stored in your fat cells. It can’t tell that you’ve already got plenty of calories stowed there. And so the classic surge-and-crash begins, sending your hunger into overdrive for the entire day, Ludwig explains.

In fact, if you opt for that bagel-and-nonfat-cream-cheese breakfast, your hunger will return about two times faster



than if you ate something with a balance of slowly digested carbs, fat and protein, such as half a whole-grain bagel topped with full-fat cream cheese, smoked salmon, onion and tomato. “Both bagel options are around the same number of calories, but the latter contains fiber, protein and fat,” says Ludwig. “These digest slowly, causing a gentler rise in blood sugar, keeping the release of insulin slower and subsequent hunger in check.” That whole-grain carb also kicks sensitivity to leptin, the “I’m full” hormone, into high gear. And the protein from the salmon lowers levels of the “I’m hungry” hormone, ghrelin.

Read on for more on how to rein in your hunger and regain control.

How Hungry Are You Really?

NEXT TIME YOU’RE THINKING ABOUT EATING, PAUSE AND USE THIS GUIDE TO FIGURE OUT IF YOU’RE ACTUALLY HUNGRY.



STARVING & RAVENOUS?

Hunger only drives about three-quarters of the food choices we make. Habit, mood, stress levels and whether we’re socializing influence the rest, says Ellen Albertson, Ph.D., R.D., a psychologist and founder of smashyourscale.com. While the occasional, “I’m not hungry, but I’d love dessert” rationalization is OK (and expected), understanding hunger cues keeps mindless eating in check. In fact, the ability to recognize real hunger is one of the biggest hallmarks of naturally slender people (those who remain at a healthy weight without dieting), says 2015 research from the Cornell Food and Brand Lab.

At this point, you likely have a headache or feel shaky and light-headed. Try to avoid this heightened hunger. “When you put off eating until you’re famished, you’re more likely to eat anything and everything you can get your hands on—and do so quickly—which primes you to overeat,” says Michelle May, M.D., founder of Am I Hungry? Mindful Eating Programs. “But you don’t need more food than usual,” May says. To avoid overeating, take a few bites of something that takes the edge off, then pause. “This gives you time to think about what—and how much—to eat. And you avoid quickly going from starving to stuffed.”



NOTICEABLY HUNGRY?

Right now, the physical symptoms of hunger, like hunger pangs, growling or a hollow feeling in your gut are in full effect. Your concentration and mood might also be going south. This is the ideal time to eat. “You’re less likely to overeat and food tastes better when you’re at this level of hunger [than if you’re ravenous],” says May. “If your urge to eat came out of nowhere, it may simply be a craving. True hunger tends to come on gradually, whereas a craving hits suddenly.” Also: If you’re not sure if you’re really hungry, wait a little while. Hunger won’t go away until you eat.



SLIGHTLY HUNGRY?

When you’re kind of hungry, the muscular walls of your stomach start to contract, perhaps causing a rumble. No need to run to the closest buffet: it’s simply a sign that you should start planning to eat soon-ish. Before you eat, drink some water. “People often confuse hunger with dehydration, so have a large glass of water, wait 15 minutes, then see if you are truly hungry,” says Brian Wansink, Ph.D., author of *Slim by Design*.

“But there are times when you’ll want to eat now, like when you want to have dinner with the family,” says May. “Just keep in mind that if you’re only a little bit hungry, you need only a little bit of food.”

Hunger Busters vs. Hunger Igniters

When it comes to foods that really satisfy, it's OK to play favorites. Here, Ellen Albertson, Ph.D., R.D., serves up the best & worst foods to satisfy your hunger.

✓ **FIBER** Beans, pears, whole-wheat pasta, oats and other fiber-rich eats provide bulk and slow digestion, which keeps you feeling fuller, longer.

✗ **REFINED CARBS** White bread, white rice, white pasta and packaged goods that have had all their whole-grain goodness extracted during processing are metabolized quickly, spiking your insulin levels and causing you to be hungrier, sooner.

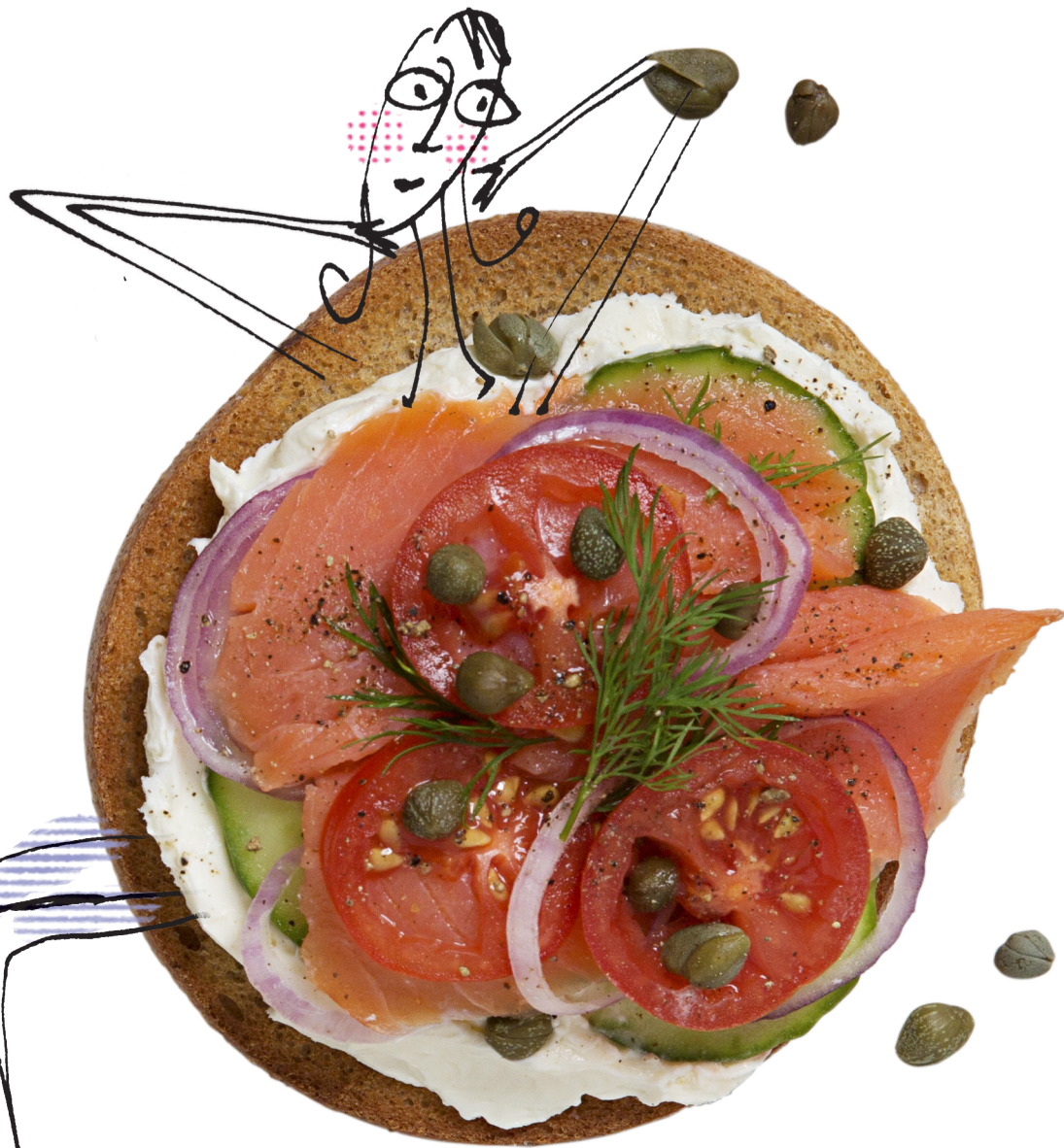
✗ **SUGAR** Sugar not only drives the insulin crash-and-burn, but it may also promote leptin resistance. Leptin is the "I'm full" hormone, so leptin resistance spurs hunger and food cravings.

✓ **PROTEIN** Eating about 25 grams of protein at a meal will help balance out the hunger-stoking effects of carbohydrates. Examples include 3 ounces chicken breast, 1 cup cottage cheese, 6 ounces Greek yogurt with an ounce of chopped almonds, 5 ounces canned tuna.

✓ **HEALTHY FATS** An easy way to prevent the insulin boom-and-bust at a meal is to add some healthy unsaturated fats. Oily fish, nuts, seeds and avocados are slower to metabolize, helping us feel full longer.

✓ **BROTH-BASED SOUP** Brothy soups and other foods high in water, such as fruits and some veggies (cucumber, celery, cabbage, tomato, etc.), bump up the food volume in your stomach so you feel full faster. (For a double dose of satiety, add fiber-rich beans to your soup.)

✓ **FULL-FAT DAIRY** The higher fat content in whole-milk products can make you feel fuller faster. Even though they're higher in calories than their lower-fat counterparts, you'll probably eat less. 🍷



NOT HUNGRY OR FULL?

If you're comfortable and content, why are you reaching for food? Do a quick self check-in. Are you mindlessly following a script—for example, eating lunch at noon because that's when you usually do? "People who follow scripts are less likely to tune into internal hunger cues," says Wansink. If that's the case, recognize that you want to eat, but you're not hungry. "Don't say 'I can't have it.' Instead, acknowledge that you're not actually hungry." Wansink likes to say "I'm not hungry, but I'm going to eat this anyway" out loud. "You may get some looks. I have! But it forces you to think twice and that may be enough for you to pass it by."



PRETTY FULL?

You can feel the food in your stomach—but it's not like a balloon ready to burst. This is the best time to stop eating. To tune into your internal stop-eating cues, pause periodically throughout your meal to check your fullness. "Put your fork down, drink some water and really feel your stomach," says May. "If you comfortably sense the food in your belly, stop. You can always eat more, later, if you need to." (To help you avoid overeating, use smaller plates so even if you're a clean-plate-club-style eater, your portions will naturally be smaller.)



OVER-STUFFED?

Are you super-focused on how uncomfortable your belly is right now, and how stretched it feels? Feeling sluggish? Sorry to say, you ate too much. Move away from the table! If you regularly overshoot and eat to this overfull state, try to slow down, chew your food thoroughly and put your fork down between bites, says May. Serve yourself smaller portions and do it from the stove—not family-style. Getting up for helping number two forces you to tune into your fullness.