

## **Four Reasons You Feel Hungry When You May Not Need to Eat**

Appetite can fool us into thinking we're hungry when most of the time we may have a completely different need. Distinguishing between false hunger and true hunger will help you know when your body really needs food and when it needs something else.

1. **Hunger Due to Eating the Wrong Food:** Symptoms include craving high sugar foods or feeling "hungry" soon after eating a meal. If you just had a big meal that is high in simple carbohydrates and that did not contain fiber, protein or healthy fat, all of which help provide a sense of satiety, you may experience a drop in blood sugar due to a pronounced insulin response. In this case, have a healthy snack, such as a piece of fresh fruit and nuts, or cottage cheese or celery and peanut butter or 1/2 of a sandwich on whole grain bread).
2. **Emotional Hunger:** Sometimes, our appetites can go haywire when we are experiencing boredom, fear, anxiety, stress or loneliness. Try taking a walk, journaling, listening to some favorite music, calling a friend or chewing a piece of mint gum instead. Read a book, go to a "safe place" like a library or museum or park where you will not be tempted to overeat or be distracted by food. Take a bath, meditate, or think about what REALLY would satisfy you, vs. eating to suppress emotions you do not want to confront.
3. **Hunger Due to Sleepiness:** Two major hormones, leptin and ghrelin, affect and control sensations of hunger and fullness. Ghrelin stimulates appetite, while leptin, made in fat cells, alerts the brain that you have had enough to eat. Lack of sleep causes a significant drop in leptin levels as well as an increase in ghrelin levels, a so-called double whammy for appetite control and feelings of satiety. Daytime fatigue may lead people to overeat (often consuming highly processed, nutrient-poor foods) in an attempt to get an extra surge of energy. This response provides only temporary relief, which is soon followed by a crash in energy levels and a resurgence of "hunger" leading to more snacking, increased cravings, etc....a vicious cycle. If you are feeling mid-afternoon hunger pangs, try: a brisk 10 min walk around the block (fresh air helps, as does exercise, to boost alertness and increase circulation), a cup of green tea (high in antioxidants and low in caffeine relative to coffee), a 1/4 cup of almonds and a small apple (high in protein, healthy fat and carbohydrates, low in sugar, and a good source of magnesium and fiber).
4. **Hunger Due to Thirst:** We often mistake thirst for hunger. Try drinking a glass or two of water to identify whether you are truly hungry or just slightly dehydrated, in which case water should suffice.

When you are experiencing true hunger, it is pretty easy to identify. For instance, a growling stomach will cause us to be cranky and unfocused...until we get some food. If it has been four hours since your last meal or snack, you may well be hungry. Don't ignore true hunger...doing so may cause you to overeat to

compensate for the missed calories. It is important to eat regularly and consistently to keep energy levels elevated and avoid dips in blood sugar. Try to include fruits and vegetables at each meal and snack, along with some protein (cheese, beans, lean meat/poultry/fish) and some healthy fat (avocado, olives, nuts, oil). This whole foods approach will help keep you at a healthy weight and help keep energy levels high.

Source: Brooke Joanna Benlifer, RD