

# Conscious Eating

Why the attention you give to the act of eating can deeply affect your health

By Sara Avant Stover

**W**e can all relate to eating from a paper bag in the car during rush-hour traffic or gobbling down a snack bar while running to catch the train. Nowadays, it is easy to neglect the sacredness of our food. But the quality of foods that you eat, and the attention that you give to the act of eating, deeply affect your health and consciousness.

The practice of conscious eating honors the inherent divinity of food as the sustainer of life just as it benefits our bodies and minds. Today, millions of

Americans suffer from digestive disorders such as heartburn, gas, constipation, and irritable bowel syndrome, to name a few. In time, all can lead to more serious diseases. Although the causes of these disorders are complex, rushed and distracted eating surely doesn't help. The quality of your digestion can increase dramatically by simply eating more slowly and mindfully. Even better, conscious eating is a practice you can do anytime, anywhere.

## **Engaging the senses**

The digestive process begins when one smells or sees delicious foods. This sensory courtship prompts saliva-



tion and the secretion of digestive enzymes, priming your system for the upcoming meal. For this reason, it is important to eat foods that look and smell good. In short, if it doesn't make you salivate, don't bother eating it!

The next step of digestion happens after you have chosen your food and taken the first bite. On this topic, Mahatma Gandhi advised us to chew our drinks and to drink our solids. If food is not chewed thoroughly, your saliva's amylase enzymes, which are responsible for carbohydrate digestion, aren't in contact with the food long enough to begin the digestive process. Swallowing large bits of insufficiently chewed food can cause gas or indigestion.

Eating on the run or making meals social or business affairs can divert attention from the digestive (and chewing) process. Stress and negative emotions cause even the most wholesome of foods to turn sour and strain the digestive system. With this in mind, make it a priority to choose a relaxing and comfortable eating venue.

Less-than-optimal dining scenarios are unavoidable facts of life, and, for most of us, it is a challenge to make time for a conscious eating practice for every meal! Increase your chance of success by choosing at least one meal a day when you can fully practice and be present with your food. Then for the other meals, incorporate what you can.

## TEN STEPS TO CONSCIOUS EATING

### 1. HYDRATE

Be sure that you are hydrated before your meal. It is best to drink liquids between 20 minutes and one hour prior to eating. Drinking liquids during meals can hinder the digestive process by diluting digestive enzymes and the stomach's hydrochloric acid, thus impairing digestion. If you must drink with a meal, sip small amounts of warm water or an herbal tea such as ginger or peppermint (herbs that aid with digestion). Avoid cold drinks; they weaken *agni*, the digestive fire.

### 2. BREATHE

Before you eat, do 5 minutes of diaphragmatic breathing. This relaxes the nervous system and enhances blood flow to the digestive organs. It also helps you tune into your body so that you eat only what your body needs.

### 3. EXTEND GRATITUDE

Recite a blessing of gratitude for the food, the earth, and everyone involved in growing, preparing, and

bringing the food to you. Sentiments of gratitude alone can boost the immune system!

### 4. ENGAGE THE SENSES

Take time to look at the food and appreciate its shapes, colors, and textures. Smell your food, and enjoy its aromas.

### 5. SAVOR THE FIRST BITE

Savor your first bite. Let it rest in your mouth, and see if you can detect what tastes are present. Feel the delight and pleasure of your first bite.

### 6. CHEW WELL

Chew slowly and thoroughly. Notice the impulse to swallow prematurely and resist it. Try chewing the food as many as 30 times to the point that it is liquefied. The more thoroughly you chew, the better your digestion will be.

### 7. SLOW DOWN

Take breaks to stop chewing and breathe. This calms your nervous system and encourages optimal digestion. In addition, by slowing down you can tune into when you are full and, in this way, avoid overeating and overtaxing your digestive system. It is best to finish eating when you still feel slightly hungry, or when your stomach feels three-quarters full. There's no need to overindulge: You can always eat again later!

### 8. OBSERVE

Turn your awareness inside your body—to your mouth and your belly—to be as present to the sensations of eating as possible. Notice what images, feelings, and inspirations, arise for you as you eat. Whenever you find your mind wandering, bring it back to what you are doing: lifting the fork, chewing, swallowing, and putting the fork down.

### 9. COMPLETE THE PRACTICE

Take a few moments before getting up from your meal. Take a few deep breaths and/or once again extend gratitude to the food and the earth and beings who provided it.

### 10. NOTICE THE EFFECTS

Be sure to notice how you digest your meals, and if this practice has any positive effects on your body, mind, or life at large.

*Continued on page 88*

## Spring Cleaning Ayurveda-Style

Continued from page 24

is the Sanskrit word for 'food of God.' *Ki* also means 'space,' and *chari* means 'move,' so kitchari helps you move into the inner space, the inner sky of consciousness. It's a wholesome, balancing food that promotes cleansing and detoxification. Also, kitchari improves clarity of perception and promotes a calm, quiet, loving, and compassionate state of mind."

4. Every night, at least one hour after dinner, take one-half to 1 teaspoon of triphala powder (an Ayurvedic herb), dissolved in hot water and allowed to steep for 10 to 15 minutes (or take 2 to 3 capsules).

### Days 6-8

1. Continue with your schedule from days 4-6.

2. Add a medicated enema, or basti, to your regimen each day after your oil massage. To prepare the enema,

boil 1 tablespoon of dashmoola (an Ayurvedic herb) in 1 pint of water for five minutes. When it cools, strain it. Use the remaining liquid as an enema. Retain the liquid for as long as you comfortably can.


### Day 9

You may cease the oil massage and enema. Enjoy kitchari for your three meals, adding steamed vegetables.

### Day 10 and beyond

Begin to integrate more foods back into your diet. Go slowly so you don't overwhelm your system.

Ease out just as you eased in during the first three days, favoring fresh produce and whole grains that agree with your dosha.

Detoxification cleanses the senses, so you can look forward to a new, heightened appreciation for the smells and tastes of your food. 

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## Conscious Eating

Continued from page 37

With practice, this will become a ritual that you won't want to live without!

### Some things to keep in mind....


- Maintain a consistent mealtime schedule as best you can.
- Be mindful of your conversations during meals. While it is best to eat in silence during meals, if this is not possible, at least try not to talk while you are chewing and to engage in calm, soothing conversations.
- Be attentive to your digestion during meals by not eating when you are upset or when you are not hungry.
- Allow a few hours to pass between meals and bedtime.
- Sit on your heels for 15 minutes after meals in the yoga pose Vajrasana; or take a short walk to facilitate proper digestion.
- Never eat while standing up, lying down, or on the run!

### Food Blessing from The Bhagavad Gita

Brahmarpanam brahma havih  
Brahmagnau brahmana hutam  
Brahmaiva tena gantavyam  
Brahmakarma samadhina  
Om Shanti Shanti Shanti

**Brahman is the offering.  
Brahman is the oblation.  
Poured out by Brahman into the  
fire of Brahman.  
Brahman is to be attained by the  
one who contemplates the  
action of Brahman.**

*(Brahman refers to Pure Consciousness)*

Alternately, you can recite a food blessing from your own faith or create one of your own! The important thing is that it has meaning for you. 

## Resources

### Suggested reading for more support and information:

- **The Path of Practice** (Wellspring/Ballantine, 2001) and **A Life of Balance** (Healing Arts Press, 1994), by Maya Tiwari
- **Ayurvedic Home Remedies** (Three Rivers Press, reprint edition, 1999), by Vasant Lad
- **Yoga and Ayurveda** (Lotus Press, 1999), by David Frawley
- **Ayurveda and Panchakarma**, by Sunil V. Joshi
- **Essential Ayurveda: What It Is and What It Can Do for You** (New World Library, 2003), by Shubra Krishan

### To order Ayurvedic herbs and supplies:

www.banyanbotanicals.com • www.himalayahealthcare.com  
www.ayurveda.com

### Where to go for Panchakarma in the United States:

www.theraj.com • www.kripalu.org  
www.ayurveda.com • www.treoflife.nu (for vegan Panchakarma)