

Everything You Need to Know about *Food Noise*



by Emily J. Dhurandhar, PhD

Thinking about food is normal. If we did not think about food often enough, we would not survive. Food naturally takes up space in our minds. But when does normal thinking turn into a problem? When does it become food noise?

From Trend to Research Topic

You may have heard about food noise in health articles, social media or patient forums. The phrase has gained popularity in recent years. Even Oprah discussed it on a weight-loss special. So, is food noise a real symptom or just a passing idea?

As more people talked about it, the idea of food noise felt familiar to patients with obesity as well as doctors and researchers. The community knew it was real, but it didn't have a name yet. Because so many people recognized it, researchers decided to give it a name and study it more closely.

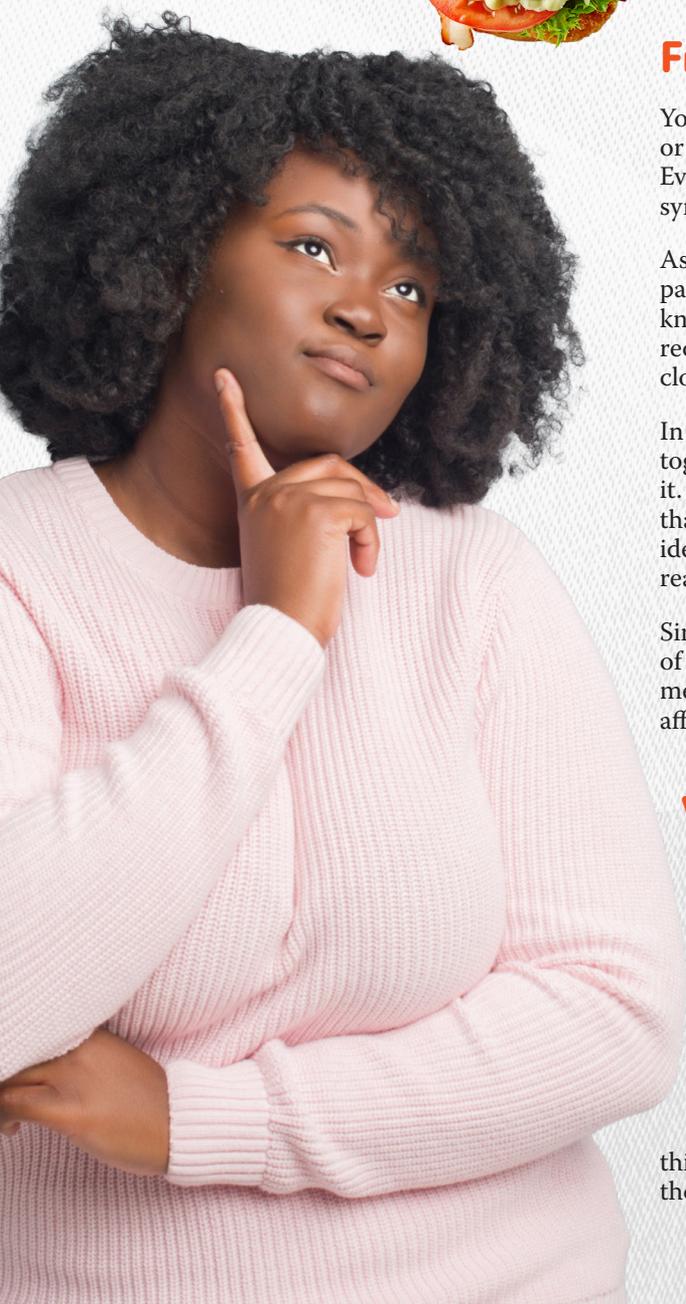
In June 2024, Dr. David Allison at Baylor College of Medicine brought together a group of experts to define food noise and find ways to measure it. He was inspired by Lord Kelvin, a scientist from the 1800s, who said that if you can't measure something, you don't fully understand it. This idea encouraged the group to move past simple explanations and build real scientific tools.

Since then, Dr. Allison and Dr. Corby Martin each led the development of food-noise questionnaires, both published in 2025. Now that we can measure food noise, more studies can explore what causes it, how it affects health and how to manage or treat it.

What Food Noise Feels Like

The word “noise,” according to the American Psychological Association Dictionary, is “any unwanted sound or, more generally, any unwanted disturbance.” Unsurprisingly, patients who describe food noise say it is unwanted.

They also call it “incessant,” “inescapable” and “unpleasant.” In the movie *Groundhog Day*, the main character Phil repeats the same thoughts and frustrations as he relives the same day. He ruminates on the same problems and gets nowhere. Patients describe food noise in a similar way—frustrating, unproductive and repetitive. In psychology, this kind of repetitive thinking is called rumination. Food noise can be thought of as rumination about food.



How It Differs from Cravings

How is food noise different from cravings or the daily challenge of food choices? Cravings may be related to food noise, and they may add to it, but they are not the same.

Cravings are often tied to triggers like time of day, a specific food or taste, a feeling or a place. Food noise often has no clear trigger. Cravings usually fade after you eat the food. Food noise can keep going—for example, thinking about the next meal while still eating the current one. Unlike cravings, which rise and fall, food noise can feel constant.

Our environment is full of food options, which might relate to food noise. But not everyone reacts strongly to the food around them. Some people pass by without struggle. The presence of food alone does not cause food noise. It is only “noisy” for people who notice it and feel bothered by it.

Some patients say they ruminate about food even when food is not nearby. They describe food noise during non-food activities like work, school or time with family and friends. This shows food noise is not only a reaction to the food environment—it can happen even when food is not present.



Can You Get Tested?

Questionnaires have been developed to measure food noise. They seem to work well and are considered reliable and valid. But scientists are still learning what the test scores really mean for health. These tools are not yet part of routine medical care.

So you may be able to get tested in the future, but testing is not widely available right now. Even if you find testing, the meaning of results is still unclear. Testing is in development and moving quickly. As studies progress, the ability to measure food noise will likely play a big role in treatment research.

Common Experiences

There is no official medical or psychological test for food noise yet, but many people report common experiences. Food-related thoughts can feel different to different people. Some find them pleasant, some neutral and some unpleasant. When thoughts of food feel unpleasant and unwanted, that may be a sign of food noise.

People who experience food noise often say:

The thoughts are frequent and intense, distracting from life.

The thoughts feel hard to control. Even pleasant ones become unpleasant if they will not stop.

The thoughts affect daily life, changing mood or behavior in ways people don't want.

There is shame about having these thoughts, and shame makes food noise feel worse.

Impact on Health

Food noise can affect what people eat and make it hard to follow a diet. People who are dieting to lose weight often report higher levels of food noise. While strict experiments haven't been done yet, many patients say food noise makes it difficult to keep up with weight-loss efforts. Future research will look at how much food noise matters for weight control and whether lowering it can help people succeed long term.



Patients taking obesity medicines like semaglutide and tirzepatide also notice changes. Some say these medicines suddenly quiet the food noise in their minds. They describe this as both surprising and welcome. A few even say that lowering food noise is a good enough reason to take the medicine even without weight loss. This shows how strongly food noise can affect mental health and well-being. For people who have dealt with constant food thoughts for years, the quiet feels dramatic and life-changing.

What about Treatment?

Scientists are just starting to study food noise, so there aren't any proven treatments yet. Since the idea is getting attention, some people claim to have simple fixes that sound like they should work. But as Dr. Allison explained, “Intuition can be a helpful guide, but we need to do the experiments to confirm our intuitions and recognize that they will often be wrong.”

Unproven treatments can bring false hope, guilt and wasted time. For now, it's best to be cautious about options that aren't backed by research. The good news is that studies are moving quickly, and better answers and real treatments are on the way.

Looking Ahead

Food noise is more than just everyday thoughts about food. It can feel constant, unwanted and hard to control. Scientists are only beginning to study it, but early research shows it likely affects health, well-being and quality of life. While treatments are not yet available, new tools to measure food noise are helping researchers understand it better. With growing attention, there is hope that future studies will lead to meaningful ways to manage and reduce food noise.



About the Author:

Emily J. Dhurandhar, PhD, is Chief Scientific Officer of Obthera, Inc., where she has overseen the dietary treatment of more than 2,500 people with obesity. She is known for her research on weight bias in obesity care and has published over 100 peer-reviewed abstracts, journal articles and book chapters.



ABOUT THE OBESITY ACTION COALITION (OAC)

The Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) is a National non-profit organization dedicated to giving a voice to individuals affected by obesity and helping them along their journey toward better health. Our core focuses are to elevate the conversation of weight and its impact on health, improve access to obesity care, provide science-based education on obesity and its treatments, and fight to eliminate weight bias and discrimination.



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The OAC knows that the journey with weight can be challenging but we also know that great things happen when we learn, connect and engage. That is why the OAC Community exists. Our Community is designed to provide quality education, ongoing support programs, an opportunity to connect, and a place to take action on important issues.

Through the OAC Community, you can get access to:

- Weight & Health Education • Community Blogs
 - Community Discussion Forum
 - Ongoing Support • Meaningful Connections
- AND MUCH MORE**



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