

Dealing with Hunger After Exercise

by Tim Church, MD, MPH, PhD; and Lisa Talamini, RDN

It's not new news that, when it comes to general health and well-being, there are many benefits to regular exercise. Sometimes, incorporating exercise into your routine can affect your appetite, hunger levels and food intake. It's important to understand the relationship between exercise and food because it can affect your weight-loss or weight management goals.



Understanding Your Hunger Levels

It is not uncommon for a doctor to hear one of two opposite statements from a patient: “After exercise, I have no appetite,” or “Exercising leaves me starving!” Your hunger and appetite can vary depending on what type of individual you are.

According to the exercise training data:

- 10% of people eat less in response to exercise
- 75% of people eat a little more in response to exercise
- 15% of people eat a lot more in response to exercise



The 3-Step Plan

There are three steps that you should take to understand your appetite and hunger levels in relation to exercise.

1. Be aware
2. Tune-in to your body
3. Utilize strategies that will help you understand and manage your hunger

Being aware of what can be causing your change in hunger levels can help you understand if you need to change anything about the way you’re exercising. While exercise can affect your eating habits, there could be other aspects of your life that are affecting them as well. Don’t assume that exercise is the sole reason for your hunger levels increasing or decreasing.

Tuning in and paying attention to your hunger levels before, during and after exercise can tell you if you need to adjust your exercise routine or the intensity of your workout. This can mean substituting weight lifting for aerobic exercise or changing the amount of time you exercise for.

If exercise is the reason your hunger levels are changing, try utilizing the below strategies to understand and manage your food intake.

1. Tune in to Your Post-Exercise Hunger Cues

After completing a workout, check in with your hunger cues. There are various scales out there, but to keep it simple, I use a level system (*one – four*). A level one means you’re not particularly hungry and a level four means you’re extremely hungry. Level two means you’re hungry but not ready to eat. Level three means your stomach is growling and starting to feel empty. After an intense workout, it is common to feel like your hunger level is at a two or three. This means you will need about 30 minutes after your workout for your body and hunger levels to adjust.

Hunger Levels



1

Not Really Hungry

2

Hungry but not ready to eat

3

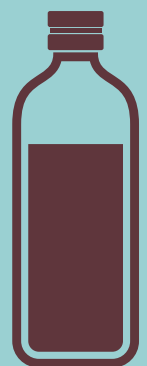
Stomach’s growling

4

Extremely Hungry

2. Separate Thirst from Hunger

It’s easy to confuse hunger with thirst, especially after a workout. Before you eat, have a long pull on your water bottle, wait 15 minutes and re-gauge your hunger level. You might find that you need food, but not as much as you first thought.



3. Let Go of Food Rewards

If you have the urge to treat yourself to a fancy muffin with your morning coffee because you just worked out, think again. Don't sabotage your workout with a food reward. The reality is that a 40-minute aerobic workout may burn only 400 calories and this can be easily undone by a 350-calorie muffin that you were not hungry for in the first place. A single episode of exercise-based reward eating is harmless enough – but when repeated often, it can become a daily habit of extra calories that can short circuit your weight management efforts.



4. Focus on Filling Foods

Filling foods are ones that satisfy your hunger with fewer calories. This includes foods that are high in water or fiber such as fruits, vegetables and whole grains. Water adds bulk while fiber fills up space in your stomach and takes longer to digest. Protein-rich foods like beans, fish, poultry and reduced-fat dairy are more satisfying because they take longer to digest and therefore keep you full for longer.



5. Savor Your Satisfaction Signals

Just because you're not eating to reward yourself after a workout doesn't mean you can't enjoy the pleasure of eating. In fact, mindful eating is its own reward. Instead of relying on an app or technology to tell you what is "enough," listen to your satisfaction signals. Slow down to notice the flavors, aromas and textures of your food. Consciously chew every bite and allow your brain the 20 minutes it takes to register fullness. With practice, you might be surprised to see how much less you eat and how much more satisfied and energized you feel as a result.



20 minutes

Here are some easy post-workout food combos that include fiber and protein:



8 oz. Greek yogurt,
1 cup berries and
2 tbsp. sliced
almonds



$\frac{1}{3}$ cup hummus
with 1 cup
carrot sticks



2 tbsp. peanut
butter and $\frac{1}{2}$ sliced
banana on
multi-grain bread



2 oz. turkey with
lettuce, tomato
and mayo on a
small roll



2 reduced-fat
mozzarella sticks with
apple wedges and 5
whole grain crackers



1 hard-boiled egg on
whole wheat toast,
topped with $\frac{1}{8}$ of an
avocado



$\frac{1}{2}$ cup oatmeal with a nonfat milk/protein-rich
milk alternative and 2 tbsp. raisins

Conclusion

In summary, regular exercise promotes better health, can contribute to weight-loss and is essential to weight maintenance. However, it can also impact your appetite and hunger levels, so it's important to know your individual response to exercise. Tuning into your eating habits in response to exercise can help you to manage your hunger. Using the strategies and tools mentioned above can help you stay active and succeed in your goals for weight management or weight-loss.

About the Author:

Tim Church, MD, MPH, PhD, serves as the Chief Medical Officer of Naturally Slim, a digital counseling program that teaches participants simple skills for changing when and how they eat instead of what they eat. In addition, Dr. Church is an adjunct professor at Pennington Biomedical Research Center at Louisiana State University and has contributed over 260 peer-reviewed research publications, many of which are focused on exercise, weight and health. Dr. Church is also a returning speaker at the Obesity Action Coalition's Your Weight Matters Convention & EXPO.

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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
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