

You are how you eat

We all know the saying ‘You are what you eat.’ But almost as important is HOW you eat. Because no matter how fabulous those nutrients are when they go in at the upper end, they aren’t going to be much use to you if you don’t absorb them as they make their way downwards.

Children often dawdle over their food, or don’t feel like eating when it’s ‘time’ to do so. This can be quite inconvenient if we have to catch a train in 10 minutes or have just spent an hour slaving over their dinner. But children may be more likely to follow the lead of their digestive systems than adults, and we would do well to follow their lead sometimes. A client recently said to me: “At mealtimes this week I made myself go at my boys’ pace instead of mine. Meals became more relaxing as a result and my stomach was more comfortable afterwards.”

So, here are some suggestions on how to eat:

Chew your food well. Try following the advice of British prime minister William Gladstone and go for 32 chews per mouthful – one for each tooth. When Horace Fletcher, the 19th-century health guru and ‘Great Masticator’, adopted the

habit of thorough chewing, he is said to have saved himself from chronic ill health and shed 42 pounds.

Chewing your food to a pulp increases saliva production, which activates starch-pulverising enzymes and also means that antibacterial and antiviral agents can get to work on any would-be invaders. Chewing also reduces the surface area of your food, so your stomach enzymes aren’t overwhelmed by enormous boulders turning up in their workplace.

Chewing sends a message to the stomach to turn on acid production so that you can absorb protein and minerals from food. It also helps ensure that when the stomach is full it sends a message to the brain to tell you that you can stop eating now. The digestive system prefers it if you eat until you are only just full rather than carry on until you are uncomfortably ‘stuffed’.

Digestion starts with the eyes. Before you start chewing, remember that digestion begins before your first forkful has even left the plate. If you look at a plate of beautiful food – perhaps a colourful array of salad vegetables or a decorative Thai stir-fry – you should start to salivate just at the sight. This gets the digestive system ready to start its work.

Next is the nose. Sit and enjoy the aromas of herbs, a garlicky sauce, or

whatever is wafting up and tantalising your olfactory nerves. This galvanises your digestive system into action, alerting the relevant organs to start producing digestive juices so that nutrients can be extracted from food and carried off to body cells.

Eat approximately every four to five hours. Grazing stresses the digestive system and is bad for the metabolism; it is better to wait until you are good and hungry before eating. A snack is advisable only if you are in danger of getting ‘hangry’ – when your blood sugar has dipped to road-rage-inducing levels – and the next meal is too far away. Leaving four to five hours between meals also gives the migrating motor complex, or ‘housekeeper’, a chance to sweep the small intestine clean between meals to keep it free of detritus and bacteria.

Relax over your meal. Our bodies do not like multi-tasking when it comes to digesting food. They will de-prioritise producing digestive enzymes and stomach acid when they are busy panicking about, say, running away from an approaching panther or going into an exam. Try to get into a relaxed zone when you eat, and sit at the table digesting afterwards for at least 10 minutes if you can. Finally, don’t forget to breathe, so as to oxygenate your tissues and help them perform their invaluable task of keeping you alive and well. ●

Sally Beare is a nutritional therapist who has travelled the world looking for the ‘secrets’ of some of the healthiest populations, writing her findings in *The Live-longer Diet* and *50 Secrets of the World’s Longest-living People*. Her latest book is *The Stacking Plan*, the aim of which is to help people take on healthy eating habits painlessly and sustainably in order to enjoy vibrant health.

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