

Regular Eating for Recovery

What Do We Mean By Regular Eating?

Establishing regular eating habits will form a fundamental part of overcoming your eating disorder. Regular eating is the foundation upon which other positive changes in your eating will be based.

If you have an eating disorder, it's likely that you've been engaging in eating behaviours that are disordered and unhelpful, perhaps for quite some time. One behaviour that is very common amongst people with eating disorders is irregular, infrequent, or delayed eating. For example, you may have a rule that you don't eat before midday, or perhaps you've become accustomed to having a small breakfast and then not eating again until dinner time, or maybe you find yourself snacking and grazing throughout the day without sitting down for a proper meal or snack.

Ideally, humans function best when we eat regularly throughout the day; this means eating every ~3 hours. For many people, regular eating involves eating 3 meals and 2-3 snacks, although sometimes it's helpful to think of it simply in terms of 5-6 eating occasions throughout the 16 or so hours you are awake.

For some people, the timing of their eating and how much they eat at each meal will vary depending on their daily patterns involving sleep, work, exercise, socialising etc. However, when you're first entering treatment for your eating disorder, you may need to pay special attention to when you're eating, and start out by "eating by the clock" in order to stay on track.

When you're first getting started, regular eating may take the following form:

- Breakfast
- Morning tea
- Lunch
- Afternoon tea
- Dinner
- Evening snack/supper



A Word on Water...

It's also important to make sure you are drinking an adequate amount of water—although not so much that you feel overly full and it discourages you to eat your next meal or snack! Water allows the body to absorb nutrients from food and transport them around the body. It also facilitates removal of waste products, and lowers our body temperature in warm weather. The human body uses approximately 4% of its body weight in water each day, and health professionals recommend Australian adults drink about 1.5-2L water daily. Failing to drink enough water can lead to dehydration, which can negatively impact our physical and mental functioning.

Why Eat Regularly?

There are lots of benefits to eating regularly, particularly during treatment for an eating disorder.

Eating regularly:

- Gives structure to your eating habits, so that eating can start to become a regular, normalised part of your life.
- Keeps your blood sugar level steady, which minimises tiredness, irritability, and poor concentration
- Helps to combat delayed or infrequent eating
- Helps to combat unstructured eating, such as grazing or picking (which may increase vulnerability to binge eating)
- Establishes habits that will help prevent binge eating - when eating regularly, you are less likely to become overly hungry and feel out of control of your eating
- Improves metabolic functioning and prevents your body from going into "starvation mode"

(see our handout on Starvation Syndrome).

Changing your eating habits can feel overwhelming, so regular eating is a great place to start! Once the routine of eating every ~3 hours is in place, you can then begin to modify your food choices and portion sizes.



Plan, Prepare, Prioritise!

When establishing your own system of regular eating be sure to remember the 3 Ps—Plan, Prepare, Prioritise! Early on in treatment it pays to plan out and prepare your meals and snacks in advance. You won't have to do this forever, and in future your eating can become more flexible, but for now, thinking several steps ahead will help to keep you on track! Right now, regular eating must be a priority in your life, and may need to take precedence over other activities. This may mean temporarily reshuffling your work day, when you choose to socialise, or other commitments.

Tips for Regular Eating

- Aim not to miss a meal or snack - if you do, be sure to get 'back on track' as soon as you notice!
- Do not leave a gap of more than 4 hours between meals/snacks
- Avoid eating between your meals and snacks. If you consistently experience hunger between meals and snacks this may be a clue that you need to increase the size or density of your meals and snacks
- If you purge (i.e., vomit or use laxatives) the meal or snack doesn't count towards regular eating
- Consider carrying a snack (muesli bar, dried fruit, nuts) with you in the car or your handbag, in case you get caught out of the house/office at mealtimes.