



Mastering Meals Step-By-Step

To take care of yourself and others with food, it is important to have regular, reliable meals. For meals to happen consistently, day after day, they must be rewarding and satisfying. Take it step-by-step, and move along at your own pace.



1

Re-Think Mealtime. A meal is when you sit down and eat, by yourself or with others. If you don't normally have meals or don't care to plan them, that is up to you. Keep in mind we aren't talking about cooking from scratch, preparing only "fresh" food, or following a bunch of food rules. We are talking about *structure* with eating. Establishing a predictable meal pattern can help you feel reassured of when you will be able to eat again. Experiment to see if prioritizing meals at regular intervals during the day helps to support your eating.

2

Get the meal habit. Start by having the same foods you are eating now, just have them at regular meal and snack times. It can be helpful to have a meal planned before hunger strikes. Make meals you enjoy by combining a variety of foods that fill you up. This will help you to feel satisfied until the next meal or snack time.

3

Plan ahead. Start in the morning by thinking about what you might have for lunch or dinner. Then try to figure out meals a day or two ahead of time. When you introduce a new food, plan to also include a food you know you enjoy at that meal. Eat—or not. Even if you choose a new food and cook it, you might decide not to eat it this time.

4

Add on, don't take away. Once you get into a regular meal and snack routine, you may get tired of eating the same foods all the time. Gradually add in more variety of foods to what you are eating, making only one change at a time. To calm down family members who get upset by anything new, point out that their favorites are still there. Tell them they don't have to eat anything they don't want to. Maintain a Division of Responsibility. You decide what, when and where to offer meals and snacks, they decide how much and whether to eat.

5

Make it sustainable. Too often people who get organized with meals get caught in food rules that label food as "good" or "bad." Those rules are hard to sustain and will get in the way of having meals by making eating feel like a chore and a bore. To keep meals positive and rewarding, choose foods you enjoy to plan, prepare, and eat!

Make wise use of "forbidden" food. Include chips or fries at mealtime as often as you want them, and eat as much as you want. For children, offer only one serving of dessert at meals (allowing them to eat it at any point during the meal) so it does not compete with other foods. Include sweets regularly at sit-down snacks, and let your child eat as much as they want. Do the same yourself.

Snacks support mealtime. Children and adults need to arrive at meals hungry and ready to eat, but not overly hungry. Having snacks at set times about halfway between meals can help. Allow family members to only have water (not foods or sweetened drinks) between meals or snacks.