



## When food is foe

By Nancy Clark, M.S., R.D.

For Active.com

April 11, 2006

*"I try to stay away from peanut butter; I end up eating the whole jar."*

*"I don't keep cookies in the house."*

*"I can't eat just one Hershey's Kiss. It's all or nothing."*

All too often, I hear my clients bemoan their battles with food. For them, peanut butter and chocolate are "trouble foods," not one of life's pleasures. Ice cream is also taboo, and fights with food are a daily energy drain.

Because too many fitness exercisers and competitive athletes deem food to be the fattening enemy, SCAN (the Sports and Cardiovascular Nutrition Practice Group of the American Dietetic Association, [www.SCANdpg.org](http://www.SCANdpg.org)) focused their 2006 conference on ways to help athletes improve their relationship with food and their bodies.

Below are just a few tips from sports dietitians and other health professionals who help active people transform their food fears into peaceful fueling.

### Hungry or bored?

When you can't determine if you want to eat because you're hungry or bored, Dallas eating disorder specialist Jessica Setnick, R.D., suggests you try the "apple test." Ask yourself, "Would I want to eat an apple now?" (or any other food that's boring for you). According to Setnick, if you're hungry enough to eat a boring apple, then you're most likely truly hungry.

But if you bypass the apple only to indulge in apple pie, think again. Maybe you're just bored and are using food to entertain yourself?

### Food or drug?

Why do you want to eat apple pie even when you're not hungry? Setnick suggests the treat acts like a drug and diverts your attention away from uncomfortable feelings. Eating something yummy is far more fun than feeling bored, lonely, anxious or unloved.

Unfortunately, frequent sessions of overeating to smother feelings with food can easily lead to weight gain. The weight gain then leads to dieting, blowing the diet, gaining more weight, going back on the diet ...

While few of us readily share our feelings, our culture does allow us to talk about cookie cravings and pizza "pig outs." While some of these overeating episodes are enjoyable, others can be depressing -- a red flag for emotional hunger. If that's your case, be gentle with yourself when your eating feels out of control. Acknowledge your struggles, write in a journal, talk to a friend, get enough sleep.

When you get mad enough at yourself for using food to smother your feelings, Setnick suggests you think about alternative ways to cope with life's problems. Ask yourself "How would someone without an eating disorder manage this situation?" Normal eaters, who overeat on holidays, at restaurants, etc., don't beat themselves to a pulp by running 10 extra miles or starving themselves the next day. They simply feel less hungry and naturally eat less. They trust their bodies to make up for their overindulgences.

If you can't trust your body to regulate your food intake, you might benefit from professional help; the referral networks at [www.eatright.org](http://www.eatright.org) or [www.SCANDpg.org](http://www.SCANDpg.org) can help you find a local sports dietitian.

### **To eat or not to eat?**

When you know you should eat better but can't manage to do so, a part of you is unwilling to make the required food changes. Perhaps you believe eating more at breakfast will make you fat? Or eating a little peanut butter on a bagel will lead to devouring the whole jar of peanut butter?

According to nutrition therapist Molly Kellogg, R.D., L.C.S.W., of Philadelphia, try making your fear -- If I eat breakfast, I'll end up eating more all day -- into an experiment. Promise yourself you'll eat more breakfast for one week (or even three days) and observe what happens. At the same time, tell yourself you can always go back to your old ways after having experimented with the new eating plan.

Keep an open mind and observe any benefits that occur as a result of the dietary improvement. That is, if you experiment with eating a bigger breakfast, do you feel better? Are you less hungry all day? More productive? Do you have better workouts? Crave fewer sweets? Eat a smaller dinner followed by less desire to snack?

Perhaps you'll come to appreciate breakfast as being the most important meal of your sports diet! If the benefits of the new food plan outweigh the past fears of weight gain, you may even lose the desire to revert to your coffee-only breakfast. Give it a try.

### **Who's the prettiest of them all?**

When you look at your body in the mirror, do you admire your whole body's beauty? More likely, you just see flaws in your chest, abdomen and thighs. No glamour model here! Advertisements from the "beauty industry" (the businesses that sell make-up, hair coloring, plastic surgery, liposuction, etc.) increase anxiety about how we look - especially as we age.

According to Larry Kirkwood, Kansas artist and body image educator, the beauty industry defines women as being sex objects and possessions. The industry's messages are "Be sure you look good every minute of every day so you'll be attractive to men" and "Don't lose your good looks as you age."

The fear of losing youthful beauty makes many people feel anxious; they might color their hair to look "young" again, buy cream to hide wrinkles, or starve themselves to be svelte. They easily forget that aging is a normal process and adds a beauty of its own.

Kirkwood reminds us that beauty isn't an inherent quality nor a contest; beauty comes from the mind and soul. You can be beautiful at any size. If you don't believe that message and, like many athletes, are struggling with your body image, learn some skills that help you feel better about yourself regardless of your perceived "flaws." Two Web sites, [www.about-face.org](http://www.about-face.org) and [www.AdiosBarbie.com](http://www.AdiosBarbie.com), can help you find peace and appreciate your body for all that it does for you ... like let you be an athlete.

*Sports nutritionist Nancy Clark, M.S., R.D., counsels both casual and competitive athletes in her private practice at Healthworks (617-383-6100). Her popular [Sports Nutrition Guidebook](#), [Food Guide for Marathoners](#) and [The Cyclist's Food Guide](#) offer information to help active people eat well and find peace with food. They are available at [www.nancyclarkrd.com](http://www.nancyclarkrd.com).*

Copyright 2006 Nancy Clark