



# DON'T EAT AFTER 7:00 P.M. and Six Other Weight Management Myths

BY MICHELLE MAY, M.D.



**D**iets are filled with dogma about when, what, and how much to eat. Certainly “the rules” are usually based on observations that make sense; but unless you understand why you do certain things, you’ll break the rules as soon as the temptation is greater than your motivation. Let’s examine some of these myths, where they come from, and how to make long-term changes that will work for you.

**MYTH:**  
**Don’t Eat  
After 7:00 P.M.**

Your metabolism doesn’t shut off at 7:01 P.M., so why is this rule so common? It is based on the observation that a lot of people who struggle with their weight overeat in the evening. Most people have already eaten dinner, so they aren’t snacking because they’re hungry. They snack because of boredom, television, loneliness, and other triggers.

Rather than creating a rule to address those habits, ask yourself, “Am I hungry?” whenever you feel like eating in the evenings. If you truly are, eat, keeping in mind that your day is winding down, so you won’t need a huge meal. If you aren’t, consider why you feel like eating and come up with a better way to address that need. Ken, a man in one of my workshops, realized he was just bored, so he started doing stained glass in the evenings to entertain himself. Whatever works!

### **MYTH: Eat Small Meals Every Three Hours**

This rule is based on the fact that many thin people tend to eat frequent small meals. However, most of the thin people I know don’t check their watch to tell them it’s time to eat—they eat when their body tells them to. They eat when they’re hungry and stop when they’re satisfied. Since that tends to be a small meal, they get hungry again in a few hours.

Instead of watching the clock, begin to tune in to the physical symptoms of hunger to tell you when to eat. And remember, your stomach is only about the size of your fist, so it only holds a handful of food comfortably. By learning to listen to your body’s signals, you are likely to follow a frequent small-meal pattern naturally.

### **MYTH: Don’t Let Yourself Get Hungry**

This one is based on the belief that overweight people are incapable of controlling themselves when they are hungry. In my experience with hundreds of workshop participants, once they learn to tell the difference between physical hunger and head

hunger, the opposite is true.

Think about it. When you’re hungry, food tastes better and is more satisfying. My grandmother used to say, “Hunger is the best seasoning.” Besides, if you aren’t hungry when you start eating, what’s going to tell you to stop? Of course, you also need to learn to recognize hunger and make time to eat before you are too hungry, since it’s harder to make great choices when you are starving!

### **MYTH: Exercise More When You Cheat**

I *hate* this one because it has caused millions of people to equate physical activity with punishment for eating. As a result, many people either hate to exercise or use exercise to earn the right to eat.

While it’s true that your weight is determined by your overall calories in versus your calories out, exercise is only part of the equation and has so many other important benefits. Instead of using exercise to pay penance, focus on how great you feel, how much more energy you have, how much better you sleep, and how much healthier you are becoming. In the long run, you are more likely to do something because it feels good than because you are forced to.

### **MYTH: Follow Your Diet Six Days a Week, Then You Can Have a Cheat Day**

This is absurd! What if you were a harsh, overly strict parent six days a week, then completely ignored your kids every Saturday? How would this approach work for your marriage or managing your employees?

It just doesn’t make sense to try to be

perfect (whatever that is) Sunday through Friday while obsessing about everything you're going to eat on your day off. Then, on Saturday, you overeat just because you're allowed to, so you end up feeling miserable all day. Huh? Personally, I would rather enjoy eating the foods I love every day mindfully and in moderation. I call this being "in charge" instead of going back and forth between being in control and out of control.

**MYTH:**  
**Eat X Number  
of Calories  
(or X Number of Points)  
Every Day**

Does it make sense that you would need exactly the same amount of fuel every day?

Aren't there just days when you are hungrier than others, maybe because of your activity levels or hormonal cycles?

Rather than setting yourself up to "cheat" on those hungry days and forcing yourself to eat more food than you want on your less-hungry days, allow yourself the flexibility to adjust your intake based on your actual needs rather than an arbitrary number. Important: for this to work long-term, you also need to learn to tell the difference between physical hunger and head hunger.

**MYTH:**  
**Carbs Are Bad  
(or Fat Is Bad)**

This "good food-bad food" thinking makes certain foods special. As a result, you may feel deprived and think about them even



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more than you did before. Worse yet, healthy foods become a four-letter word.

The truth is, all foods fit into a healthy diet. Since different foods have various nutritional qualities and calorie content, you can use the principles of balance, variety, and moderation to guide you, without trying to restrict an entire food group.

## **TRUTH: You Are In Charge**

I assume the rule-makers are well-intentioned and don't realize that they've created a tightrope that most people will fall off of sooner or later. If your head hadn't already told you that all these rules are crazy, wasn't your heart saying there had to be a better way?

It's time to give yourself a wider path that you can stay on forever. Allow yourself the flexibility to make any decision as long as you consider the advantages and disadvantages of your choices and always keep self-care in mind.

**MY**

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# Health Briefs

## **HYPOTHERMIA: A COLD-WEATHER RISK FOR OLDER PEOPLE**

Older adults are especially vulnerable to hypothermia, which can be deadly if not treated quickly. The National Institute on Aging (NIA), part of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), has some advice to help older people avoid hypothermia.

Here are a few tips:

- Wear several layers of loose clothing when it is cold. The layers will trap warm air between them. Tight clothing can keep blood from flowing freely and lead to loss of body heat.
- Wear a hat, scarf, gloves or mittens, and warm clothes when you go outside in cold weather. A significant amount of your body heat can be lost through your head, and hands and feet are the first body parts to get cold.
- To keep warm at home, wear long underwear under your clothes, along with socks and slippers. Use a blanket or afghan to keep legs and shoulders warm, and wear a hat or cap indoors.
- Make sure your home is warm enough. Set your thermostat to at least 68 to 70 degrees. Even mildly cool homes with temperatures from 60 to 65 degrees can trigger hypothermia in older people.
- Check with your doctor to see if any medications (prescription or over-the-counter) you are taking may increase your risk for hypothermia.

*The NIA has free information about hypothermia. To order the fact sheet Hypothermia: A Cold Weather Hazard or the brochure Stay Safe in Cold Weather, call toll-free 1-800-222-2225. These and other free publications on healthy aging can be downloaded from the NIA website at [www.nia.nih.gov](http://www.nia.nih.gov).*