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The Problem with Cheat Days



You've committed to eating healthy. You want to look and feel great, and you've stuck to your diet an entire week already. You feel good about how you've done and think you deserve a gold star... or that cupcake that's calling your name (especially the one with the extra layer of frosting on top). Maybe you even think you deserve a day off—a designated "cheat day."

But are "cheat days" a good idea? Do these special days of indulgence help you reach your health goals? Or do they set you up on a seesaw of destructive eating habits?

The Argument for Cheat Days: Rewarding Yourself

Some say that giving yourself days of indulgence is giving yourself a needed break from your diet. These cheat days are a relief valve that help you stick to healthier foods.

The philosophy behind this basically goes something like this: Healthy eating requires some [willpower](#)—willpower you've used to keep yourself from forbidden foods—so to reward your constraint, it helps to have one scheduled day (or meal) per week where you're allowed to eat some of the treats you've been avoiding. When you give yourself a window to enjoy these off-limit foods, it'll satisfy your cravings, replenish your [depleted willpower](#), and, some studies suggest, even increase your production of the hunger-dampening hormone leptin while boosting metabolism.

The Argument Against Cheat Days

So cheat days sound like a good thing, right? Not so fast. The logic behind these days has more than a few flaws, and it's due to the psychology and physiology behind them.

The Name Is to Blame

The trouble with cheat days starts with the wording.

"The very phrase 'cheat day' sets up enjoying a meal as something forbidden," says [Sondra Kronberg](#), R.D., executive director of the Eating Disorder Treatment Collaborative. "Separating foods into 'good' and 'bad' categories encourages you to associate eating with guilt and shame." This means that instead of enjoying everything we eat, we feel bad about ourselves when we eat something we consider "bad."

What's more, when we deem certain foods "bad" or "cheating," the negative name doesn't help us pump the breaks.

"When a food is off-limits, it can develop a specific, emotional charge," explains Melainie Rogers, RD, a nutritionist and eating disorder specialist. "You begin obsessing over it, fantasizing about, and looking forward to that 'indulge day' all week. Then, when you finally have access to it, you overeat."

On the flipside, labeling foods as "good" or "healthy" can also backfire. Science shows when we think something is healthy, we're not concerned with [portion control](#) and thus overdo it—whether it's a "normal" day or a "cheat" day. Yes, there can be too much of a good thing.

Along these same lines, thinking of a meal or snack as "healthy" can have a surprising affect on our hunger. [Studies show](#) merely considering items we put in our mouth as "healthy" can literally make us feel hungrier—especially if we select a "good-for-you" item out of obligation over something we're truly hungry for.

Attack of the Calories

Folks who assume they can compensate for giving into temptations—say, by holding themselves back on all days except their cheat days—are actually [less likely](#) to reach their dietary goals. This is because they're more likely to consume a greater number of calories, not just on their cheat day but on the days following it.

Restricting ourselves throughout the week and then [slamming our bodies with sugar](#) and fat once our cheat day rolls around, can have “a massive impact on blood sugar and insulin levels,” Rogers says. “You’ll wake up the next day craving more sugars and simple carbs, and you’ll find yourself feeling pretty ragged. And if you repeatedly increase your caloric intake above baseline, you may inadvertently end up gaining more weight over time.”

Cravings serve as a sign that your nutritional approach isn't sound. “Most [cravings](#) come from overly restricting your food intake, using food as a drug, or over exercising,” Kronberg says.

Binging Leads to Extra Cheat Days

There's a very fine line between a cheat day and a free-fall into food binging, especially if you're, “white-knuckling it during those other six days of sticking out a meal plan you don't particularly like,” says Ryan Andrews, R.D., author of *Drop The Fat Act and Live Lean* and coach with [Precision Nutrition](#). Once that day of indulgence comes, it's not about enjoying the foods you haven't had all week. Instead, you're approaching it out of a need to consume all you can before the day goes away. “It feeds into a feast-and-famine cycle,” Andrews says.

We can thank our biology for cheat days turning into these all-out food fests. We're wired to chase down food when we're caught in the feast-and-famine cycle. “People will eat beyond satiety when they're coming from a fear of scarcity,” Rogers explains.

Binging on a cheat day also makes it challenging to confine cheat-day foods only to that designated 24-hour window. “It's very hard for people to compartmentalize their diets,” Rogers says. “‘I'm only going to have those cookies on Saturday’ can easily spill over into ‘I'll only have a few cookies Sunday too.’”

The Solution: Stop Restricting, Start Enjoying—in Moderation

So if cheat days don't work, are we all better off eating whatever we want, whenever we want?

Well, not quite, says [Corby K. Martin](#), Ph.D., a clinical psychologist and food intake researcher at Pennington Biomedical Research Center. “Following a healthy diet means including a number of foods—all of which are consumed in moderation,” he says. “If weight loss is the goal, this usually means three square meals a day with planned snacks, incorporating treats but in smaller portion sizes.”

Research suggests eating a balance of foods—with none of them off-limits or labeled “bad”—is the best way to [reduce the kinds of cravings](#) that can lead to a binge.

During the first week of a new diet, most people experience an increase in hankerings for coveted foods, but when people stick to a balanced weight loss diet, the tendency to occasionally [overeate actually goes down](#) over time, Martin says.

So what does a game plan for a healthy eating with no cheat days look like? Remember these three things:

1. Listen to your appetite.

"If you want to eat spaghetti and meatballs for dinner, have it!" Andrews says. "Don't find the low-carb version with the fat-free sauce. If you actually eat what you want, you'll likely end up eating a more reasonable amount of it." Eating in tune with your hunger is a principle of intuitive eating, and it's shown to have a positive effect on both your weight and your wellbeing.

2. Enjoy treats from time to time.

Research shows (and experts agree) that sprinkling reasonably sized desserts or treats into your daily diet encourages you to find pleasure in meal time again—and that pleasure will help ensure you don't feel the need to go overboard.

So instead of confining your treats to one single day, drop them into places throughout the week. For example, enjoy: "a cookie or a few pieces of chocolate after dinner on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays," Rogers says.

3. Savor every bite.

Once you place any item of food into your mouth, take a moment to: "taste, smell, and experience it as a whole," Rogers says. "When you [take the time to be mindful](#) about what you're eating, you tap into your satiety cues."

The Takeaway

Forget about designating a cheat day to reward yourself. Denying yourself most of the week and then indulging like crazy on your one day "off," just promotes guilt, anxiety, and shame around eating—which means you won't likely get to the health outcome you're looking for. Instead, make every day a great day by listening to your appetite, periodically adding in some of your favorite foods in small portions, and savoring each and every bite of everything you eat. This sustainable approach will help you think of all of your eating as enjoyable, and that's what gets you down the road to where you want to be.