

8 Tips for Winning The Food Fight

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By [EatingWell](#), [EatingWell.com](#)



Staying in control of what we eat can be challenging in our world, where tempting foods seem to loom at every turn. "In the past, we'd teach people how to handle predictable food situations, like what to do in a restaurant and how to navigate the supermarket," says Cynthia Bulik, Ph.D., director of the Eating Disorders Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and co-author of [Runaway Eating: The 8-Point Plan to Conquer Adult Food and Weight Obsessions](#) (Rodale, 2005). "But what do you do when you bump into a candy display by the checkout counter at the shoe store? We need a bigger set of skills." Here, Bulik and others offer advice for beating the tendency to binge and improving your relationship with food.

Keep a food diary.

Recording everything—the ice cream binge as well as the carrots and celery—"makes everything you eat part of the plan," says Elena Ramirez, Ph.D., co-founder of the Vermont Center for Cognitive Behavior Therapy in South Burlington, Vermont. "It's no longer a sneaky bad thing." Keeping track of your calories can help you lose weight, too, as it helps tip you off to behaviors that lead to weight gain. A daily food diary, in fact, is an integral part of [The EatingWell Diet](#) (Countryman, 2007).

Plan for the occasional piece of cheesecake.

Studies suggest that feeling deprived—even if you are consuming plenty of calories—can actually trigger overeating. Making any food off-limits "just increases its allure," confirms Ramirez. If pizza is your downfall, it might be too tempting to keep in your house—but you can learn to enjoy it in a "safe" environment, she notes. "Make a trip to a pizza place, order a slice and enjoy it out in the open. The more you practice this, the more it becomes ingrained behavior." She adds, "You can't avoid a trigger food your whole life, but you can learn how to eat the foods you binge on in moderation."

Give up grazing.

While eating regularly helps prevent feeling deprived and hungry, "[grazing] can easily supply a binge's worth of calories, a little at a time," says Ramirez. Plan four "eating episodes" each day spaced at regular intervals to avoid going long stretches without eating (which can also trigger binging). Eat

breakfast, lunch and dinner, plus a 250-calorie midafternoon snack. At each, include a little protein for additional staying power.

Eat with intention.

Have all your meals in a designated place without distractions (i.e., not in front of the TV). That way your eating episode has a beginning and an end. Eat slowly, stopping to put your fork down between bites, feeling yourself becoming fuller. Making an effort to be mindful no matter what you're eating can help break the tendency to binge, experts say.

Expect the unexpected.

Tempting foods are more likely to trigger overeating when we come across them unexpectedly. Since surprise food confrontations are a given these days, it's helpful to "be armed with a script when you're confronted by tasty food," says Bulik. "If you're handed a sample of cookies at the supermarket, the line might be, 'No, thanks. I've just eaten.'"

Find healthy outlets for emotions.

Turning to food to "numb out" emotions like anxiety works temporarily, but after the food is gone the stressful stimulus still remains—along with a hefty dose of guilt. Find ways to experience negative emotions with a response other than eating. Try deep breathing or meditation, calling a friend or going for a brisk walk. "The more you practice these alternative behaviors, the more automatic they become," notes Ramirez. Eventually, reaching for a bag of chips can stop being the default reaction to stress.

Hide tempting foods.

When office workers were given candies in clear dishes to place on their desktops, they helped themselves to candy 71 percent more often than a similar group that was given the same candy in opaque dishes so that the candy wasn't visible, according to research by Brian Wansink, Ph.D., director of the Cornell University Food and Brand Lab in Ithaca, New York, and an EatingWell advisory board member. "We're all on the 'see-food' diet," he says, "so don't let yourself see what you don't want to eat." If you're going to keep snacks at home, stash them inside a cupboard; keep the apples out on the counter.

Make overeating a hassle.

The more stops you introduce in getting a food—such as needing to open a package or having to thaw something frozen—the more opportunities you have to ask, "Am I really hungry?" explains Wansink. Repackage cookies in single-portion bags (or pay more for individually portioned snacks); wrap leftover slices of lasagna individually in foil and freeze. No choice but to serve yourself from a large (shared) portion? Dish your portion onto a small plate. Studies by Wansink and others have shown that when served food in bigger containers, people eat more.

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