

## Journaling to create healthy choices

*Logging what you eat can reveal unhealthy hidden habits and provide direction for better nutrition.*

Whether you live to eat or eat to live, you may not be completely aware of how much, why and when you eat. Studies have shown that many seniors may be lacking in important nutrients due to poor dietary habits. Knowing what you eat reveals important information that can help you make the right choices for better health.

“Logging for an entire week gives you a good idea of your general habits,” says Nancee Jaffe, registered dietitian with the UCLA Digestive Health & Nutrition Clinic. “If you just log for a day or two, it’s not enough information because many people eat differently on weekdays compared to weekends.”

Writing down which foods you eat along with calories, protein, fats, and carbohydrates shows where you might be overindulging as well as what you may be lacking. Those main nutrient facts are on most all food labels. Before you get overwhelmed by having to read all the fine print, know that there are many free online tools that can help track foods and automatically calculate your nutrient and calorie data.

### Online tracking applications make food logging easy and convenient

My Fitness Pal ([www.myfitnesspal.com](http://www.myfitnesspal.com)) is among the most popular online tools and Jaffe uses it with many of her patients. The application is available for a computer, phone or tablet. It has a database of more than five million foods, including many different brands as well as popular restaurant items. Because the app is available through mobile devices, you can log any-



*Log your foods to better understand your eating habits.*

where, anytime without having to fuss for pen and paper. The automatic calculation makes it easy to track and view results.

“You can also enter personal notes,” adds Jaffe. “So, if you had a particularly stressful day or didn’t sleep enough you can log it. That’s useful because when we’re stressed out or not sleeping well we tend to overindulge and gain weight.”

Many online logging applications also have a community forum where you can share successes and ideas, as well as get some support.

### Managing emotional eating: Knowing a pattern of behavior helps you change it

Part of the enjoyment and pleasure of eating is that it is comforting. Emotional eating, however, can take on a life of its own. Judging, berating or feelings of failure can make people give up instead of recognizing that change takes time and has cycles of up and down. “Start by noticing your patterns of behavior,” recommends Jaffe. “As you progress you’ll start to notice mindless emotional eating after the behavior, then during the middle of it and finally you’ll start to notice the urge to mindlessly eat before you do it.” The goal is to catch yourself before you reach for food

### WHAT YOU CAN DO

- **Make** sure you eat protein daily; most seniors don’t get enough.
- **Log** foods to learn about your habits, not to berate yourself.
- **Be** patient; change takes time.
- **Track** progress with easy online apps.

and ask yourself why you’re eating. If it’s not because you’re hungry, ponder what’s driving your desire to eat.

Emotional eating often results from stress, boredom, loneliness, sadness and fatigue. Once you recognize the real reason behind your desire to snack, the next step is to do some other activity to fill that void. Maybe it’s calling a friend, or going for a walk, or putting on a movie, playing Sudoku or painting a picture. “My favorite is meditating,” shares Jaffe. “It’s sitting with the emotion, noticing the feeling and actually allowing myself to experience it because that’s the beauty of being human. Emotions are temporary. If we actually allow ourselves to be with them, they move through us.”

Learning our eating habits points us in the right direction of personal change. For example, many people snack at night after 9 p.m. Generally, that’s not out of hunger but from an emotional space. As you write down food choices, you’ll discover that you likely gravitate toward something super salty or very sweet. It doesn’t mean you can’t ever have an indulgent snack. It’s about awareness and making wise choices, such as controlling portions and types of food to eat. For example, select the 150-calorie baked potato chips instead of the 500-calorie fried version, or eating a sweet piece of fruit or frozen yogurt instead of full-fat ice cream.

Logging foods can be useful so long as it’s a tool for the good, says Jaffe. “I generally recommend logging for the short term to learn about food patterns. If it starts to feel obsessive and it leads you to emotional eating, that’s counter productive.” ■