MINDFUL MUNCHERS

Teens Toolkit Volume 2

Understanding your body, reading the room, and eating for real life.

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About This Toolkit

Volume 1 covered the basics. This one goes deeper: your hormones, your stress, your relationship with food, and how to actually apply this stuff in real life when everything is complicated.

What Your Hormones Are Actually Doing

You've heard about hormones, mostly in the context of mood swings and puberty. But hormones also run your hunger, your metabolism, and your weight. Here's the quick version:

Insulin

Released by your pancreas when blood sugar rises after eating. Too many blood sugar spikes (from sugary food) over time can lead to insulin resistance, a precursor to Type 2 diabetes. Keep blood sugar stable by eating protein and fiber with meals.

Ghrelin

The hunger hormone. It rises when your stomach is empty and drops after eating. It also spikes when you're sleep-deprived, which is why you might be hungry when you’re tired. Protect your sleep.

Leptin

The fullness hormone. It signals your brain that you've eaten enough. Chronic sleep deprivation and diets high in ultra-processed food can blunt leptin signaling, making it harder to feel full. Eat whole foods and sleep well.

Cortisol

> The stress hormone. It increases appetite, especially for high-sugar, high-fat food. Chronic stress keeps cortisol elevated, promoting fat storage around the abdomen. Managing stress is literally a weight management strategy.

Stress Eating Is Real: Here's What to Do

Stress eating isn't weak or lazy. It's a biological response: cortisol drives you toward calorie-dense food as a survival mechanism. Understanding it is step one.

Pause

Before eating when you're not physically hungry, try a 5-minute pause:

1. Name the emotion: Am I stressed? Bored? Anxious? Lonely?
2. Rate your physical hunger from 1-10. If it's below 5, you're probably not physically hungry.
3. Choose: Is food what I actually need right now, or is it something else?

This doesn't mean never eating for comfort. It means doing it consciously, not automatically.

Non-Food Ways to Handle Stress

Quick (Under 5 min)	Deeper (15+ min)
Text a friend	Go for a walk
Step outside for air	Journal what you're feeling
Do 10 push-ups or jumping jacks	Call someone you trust
Put on a song and actually listen to it	Do a workout
Splash cold water on your face	Watch something funny

The Exposure Rule

Children often need to be exposed to a new food 10-15 times before accepting it. Don't give up after one or two rejections. Keep offering (without pressure) and taste preferences will gradually expand.

Strategies That Work

- Involve kids in cooking: Children who help prepare food are significantly more likely to try and enjoy it
- Serve new foods alongside accepted favorites. Don't make new food the entire meal
- Never force eating. Pressure creates negative associations with food that can last for years
- Offer choices within healthy options: 'Do you want broccoli or carrots tonight?' gives control without giving veto power
- Model eating: Children eat what they see adults eating. If you eat vegetables with enthusiasm, they notice
- Make it fun: Dips (hummus, guacamole, yogurt) dramatically increase vegetable acceptance in kids

What Doesn't Work

- Bribing with dessert ('eat your vegetables and you can have ice cream') creates negative associations with vegetables and elevates dessert status
- Hiding vegetables doesn't build actual food acceptance or preferences
- Commenting repeatedly on what a child eats or doesn't eat increases anxiety around food

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Smarter Grocery Shopping

How you shop shapes what your family eats. These strategies make healthy choices easier and cheaper.

Before You Go

- Plan 4-5 dinners for the week before shopping. This reduces impulse buys by 30-40%
- Eat before you shop. Hungry shoppers spend more and buy more junk food
- Check your pantry first. Most families already have more than they realize
- Make a list and stick to it, but leave room for whatever produce is on sale

In the Store

- Shop the perimeter first: fresh produce, meat, dairy, and eggs are usually around the edges
- Compare unit prices, not package prices. Bigger isn't always cheaper per ounce
- Buy frozen vegetables. They're as nutritious as fresh and far less likely to go to waste
- Avoid shopping with hungry kids when possible, or give them a job (finding items, comparing prices)

- Store brands are almost always identical in nutrition to name brands at lower prices

Produce Cheat Sheet

Buy Fresh	Buy Frozen (same nutrition, cheaper)
Bananas	Berries
Apples	Mango and tropical fruits
Carrots	Broccoli, spinach, peas
Avocados	Corn
Bell peppers	Edamame
Tomatoes	Mixed vegetables

Navigating Takeout and Restaurants

Takeout is part of family life, and it doesn't have to be unhealthy. Here's how to make better choices without giving it up.

Ordering Smarter

- Default to water or unsweetened drinks, saving 200-400 empty calories per person
- Order a side salad or vegetable first. It fills some hunger before the main arrives
- Choose grilled, baked, or steamed over fried when available
- Ask for sauces on the side (most restaurant sauces are very high in sugar and sodium)
- Split large portions or box half immediately. Restaurant portions are often 2-3x a standard serving

Better Takeout Choices by Cuisine

Cuisine	Smarter Order
Mexican	Bean burrito or taco bowl with extra veggies; skip the chips
Chinese	Steamed dumplings or stir-fry; brown rice; skip fried rice
Pizza	Thin crust with vegetable toppings; limit to 2 slices

Burgers	Skip the fries; add a side salad; choose a smaller size
Indian	Dal or lentil dishes; raita; whole wheat naan
Sushi	Sashimi or rolls with avocado; miso soup; edamame

Building Food Confidence in Your Kids

The goal of family nutrition isn't just healthier meals. It's raising kids to have a positive, confident relationship with food for life. Here's how:

Teach cooking, not rules.

Kids who know how to cook are more nutritionally independent, more adventurous eaters, and have better diets as adults. Start simple: scrambled eggs, pasta, stir-fry. Skills matter more than restrictions.

- Talk about where food comes from. Visit a farmers market, grow herbs on a windowsill
- Let kids choose a new fruit or vegetable to try each grocery trip
- Celebrate trying new foods, not just liking them
- Avoid 'clean plate' rules. Teach hunger and fullness awareness instead
- Make cooking a fun weekend activity, not a chore

Monthly Family Healthy Habits Check-In

- What new food did we try this month?
- What meal did we enjoy most together?
- Did we manage to cook at home most nights this week?
- Are we drinking enough water as a family?
- Is everyone getting enough sleep?
- What's one thing we want to do better next month?

For more family resources including recipes and meal planning tips, visit mindfulmunchers.org!