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## Review

# How food overconsumption has hijacked our notions about eating as a pleasurable activity

Denise de Ridder and Marleen Gillebaart

**Abstract**

The negative effects of overconsumption of food have been extensively studied, with a focus on overweight and negative food attitudes. In this overview, we argue that this negative perspective has spilled over to food consumption in general, which is in contrast with eating as a pleasurable activity that contributes to people's well-being. We review four areas of research that have recently emerged: (de)moralization of food consumption, moderate eating for pleasure, intuitive and mindful eating, and the social benefits of eating. Throughout these four themes, it becomes clear that there needs to be a clear distinction between overconsumption of food, bearing negative consequences, and normal levels of food consumption. The latter is positively associated with enjoyment, contentment, and our social and psychological well-being.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101324>2352-250X/© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).**Keywords**

Food consumption, Well-being, Moralization, Moderation, Intuitive eating, Mindful eating, Social sharing.

**Introduction**

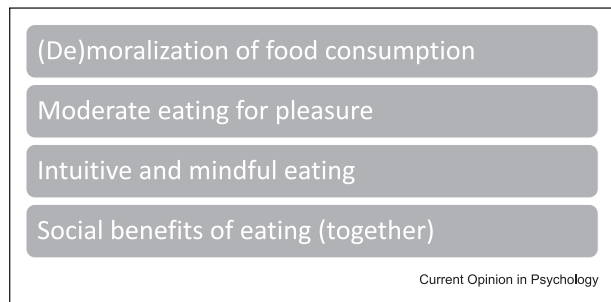
Eating is a social activity that people tend to enjoy and not engage in for the relief of visceral needs only [1]. The pleasure of food consumption is intrinsically linked to aesthetic, sensory, and symbolic experiences [2] and coupled with social sharing and cooperation [3]. Notwithstanding the rich literature describing the good things about food consumption, in the past decades

eating has become an increasingly problematic affair as a result of overconsumption with rising numbers of overweight consumers [4] and unfavorable food attitudes [5] as the unsettling consequences. In this overview, we argue that the rightful focus on the negative effects of food overconsumption has contaminated thinking about normal levels of consumption to the extent that concerns about eating too much have hijacked notions about the contentment that is naturally associated with eating.

Previous research has documented the inevitable adverse effects of food overconsumption, leading to overweight and associated risks of (chronic) illness along with a negative impact on psychological and social well-being [6]. It is well known that large parts of the population suffer from a problematic relation with food, including worrying about the quality and quantity of food [5], dieting and restraint [7], disinhibited eating [8], negative attitudes about healthy foods [9], or a preoccupation with healthy foods [10]. The physical and social features of the 'toxic' [11] food environment have been described as being responsible for overconsumption, with studies reporting in detail how the availability of cheap and palatable foods at all times and all places [12] and fuzzy norms about what, how much, when and where to eat [13] have compromised normal consumption. As a result, much of the current literature on food consumption highlights how people struggle with regulating their food intake in the midst of plenty [7,14,15].

More recently, another perspective is emerging that questions the current emphasis on food consumption as problematic behavior. We review these attempts to restore eating as a pleasurable activity by discussing four lines of research. We first summarize debate on (de)moralization of food consumption. Next, we consider research suggesting that eating enjoyment may go hand in hand with lower levels of consumption. Third, we describe research on mindful and intuitive eating. Finally, we discuss studies examining the social benefits of food consumption. By analyzing the recent shift in focus on the plus points of normal food consumption we aim to clarify when and in what way it may contribute to well-being (Figure 1).

Figure 1



Eating as a pleasurable activity: four research lines.

## An emerging perspective on the benefits of food consumption

### (De)moralization of food consumption

Hedonic hunger or eating for another reason than ‘real’ homeostatic hunger is often associated with loss of control over eating, binge eating, and obesity [16]. A lack of discipline as in being unable to resist the power of the food environment has strong moral connotations [17] with food preferences being regarded as values rather than as liking of certain foods [2]. Strict rules about good or bad food (such as ‘guilty foods’ [18]) or right or wrong eating behavior are not a recent phenomenon but nowadays stronger than ever [19]. This has resulted in uncontrolled indulgence being viewed as a vice and moderation as a virtue. Healthy diets have strong associations with the moral meaning of food [20] whereas obesity is regarded as moral failing leading to disapproval of people with low control over their appetite [21]. Remembering excessive food consumption as a moral transgression may result in feelings of guilt and subsequent attempts to restore a positive self-image by, for example, self-punishments [22]. Likewise, people who feel tempted to indulge while motivated to resist experience guilt and regret [23]. People actually indulging in ‘forbidden’ foods (e.g., meat or chocolate) suffer from guilt or disgust [24,25] or fabricate excuses for deviating from their self-set moderate eating goal [26]. Food moralization undermines social cohesion when persuasion to adopt a healthy lifestyle leads to stigmatizing people who deviate from the healthy eating norm [27]. In view of these negative consequences of food moralization, it has been suggested that balancing (‘giving in once and a while’) rather than strict restraint is a better way of dealing with food temptations [28,29], eventually resulting in improved diet quality and increased physical activity [30]. It has also been suggested that food education should be ethically reflexive rather than moralizing [31]. Together, these findings make a strong case for demoralizing moderate consumption of healthy foods.

### Moderate eating for pleasure

Hedonic hunger has been associated with lower psychosocial well-being, suggesting that eating for the purpose of pleasure may lead to distress and emotional dysregulation [32]. However, as hedonic hunger is a multifaceted concept that comprises elements of lack of control [32], it may well be that (failing) attempts at regulating eating behavior rather than indulging in food are responsible for these negative effects. Recent research suggests that eating for pleasure (‘Epicurean eating’) may not compromise well-being insofar it concerns moderate consumption of healthy and tasty foods, challenging the notion that eating for pleasure naturally coincides with eating large quantities of unhealthy food [33]. These insights are corroborated by research questioning the view that healthy foods are by definition regarded as ‘untasty’ [34]. A significant proportion of European consumers consider healthy foods to be tasty, regardless whether they were more health or pleasure oriented when deciding about food [35]. Insofar healthy foods are thought of as unappealing, this may relate to food marketing emphasizing the nutritional rather than the hedonic features of healthy food [36,37]. In a similar vein, the assumed natural occurrence of the portion size effect, where more is eaten when large amounts are offered, has been challenged. People do not hold innate preferences for large quantities of food but have gotten used to large portion sizes by frequent exposure [38]. Recent research focuses on children to prevent them from getting accustomed to large portion norms [39]. Young people can learn to appreciate smaller portions by food sensory imagery (creating a vivid mental image of the sensory experience of eating) as a reminder that eating enjoyment does not necessarily increase with portion size [40]. Overall, these new findings suggest that eating enjoyment is not at odds with consumption of small quantities of good (i.e., healthy and tasty) food when guided properly with messages to appreciate these foods.

### Intuitive and mindful eating

With intuitive eating, people use internal, rather than external cues for eating behavior. This way of eating allows for fewer influences from external pressures, guidelines, and negative food messages, and more reliance on internal motives such as hunger and enjoyment [41]. Being aware of these internal cues and motives would result in a balanced and nutritional diet, with room for hedonic consumption. Intuitive eating includes an absence of a specific or restrictive diet, and positive attitudes towards hunger, food, satiation, and their mutual relationships [42–44]. In the same realm, research has focused on ‘mindful eating’, which is based on a similar focus on internal cues but includes a meditation component as well [45]. Until recently, intuitive and mindful eating was predominantly studied in eating

disorder and dieting contexts [46,47]. However, recent studies have expanded to non-clinical populations. Intuitive eating generally seems to have positive effects on eating-related outcomes such as food choice and intake, and people's relationship with food [46,48]. In addition, intuitive eating is positively correlated with general psychological well-being [49–51], and several more specific positive outcomes such as a positive body image, higher self-esteem, and more self-compassion [42]. Moreover, these associations may be bidirectional, as negative attitudes towards eating behavior predict decreased intuitive eating [52]. Although more longitudinal research is needed to assess long-term effects and underlying processes, it seems clear that being able to rely more on internal vs. external cues for one's eating behavior allows for a more positive perspective on eating, with room for enjoyment and pleasure in addition to being more aware of cues signalling hunger and satiety.

### Social benefits of eating (together)

Eating, and specifically eating together, is an important source of interpersonal connection and group cohesion [53,54]. In addition to the modelling and normative nature of others' eating behavior [13,55,56], people tend to gravitate towards so-called *commensality*: eating at the same table [57]. Eating together can lead to less desirable consequences such as overeating [58,59] or choosing unhealthy options ([60], but the benefits tend to outweigh the disadvantages. For example, eating together amplifies sensory experiences of eating, making good food taste better (and bad food taste worse [61]). In addition, eating in a social setting can benefit subsequent social behavior. For example, eating similar food as others and sharing meals evokes trust and cooperation [62,63]. In terms of well-being, it is likely that consuming food together with others makes people happy. To illustrate, having family meals is not only beneficial for children's nutritional health, but also predicts well-being in parents [64,65]. Furthermore, in a large UK sample, there were clear associations between eating together and feeling better about oneself, contentedness, and having bigger and closer social relationships [66]. There are several factors that may play a role in the benefits of eating together. For example, eating together may facilitate conversation [67] and sharing experiences [68]. Fostering trust and cooperation, eating together will also help in creating social bonds, and stimulate community building [57,63]. Taken together, there is a clear, positive role for food and eating in our social lives, and eating socially increases eating enjoyment.

### Discussion

In this review, we briefly described four themes in recent research elaborating on the notion that normal levels of food consumption do not necessarily compromise well-being but rather bring benefits both

at a psychological and a social level. In doing so, we aim to restore a clear distinction between food overconsumption with numerous negative consequences for mental and physical health and food consumption as a natural pleasurable activity. Our analysis reveals that recent studies in the field of food moralization increasingly emphasize the negative consequences of ethicizing (over)consumption with social stigma, guilt and other negative emotions as a result, leading to a call for demoralization of eating (too much). Building upon this notion, recent studies have also questioned the assumed innate association between enjoyment and indulging in large quantities of bad foods by proposing that pleasure in eating can get along well with small portions of healthy foods (and maybe even unhealthy foods), especially when new social norms reinforce this notion. Recent research in the domain of intuitive and mindful eating underlines the idea that 'unregulated' eating reinstalls the pleasure derived from eating. Finally, new research on the social aspects of eating - previously highlighting the risk of eating too much in the company of others - now explicitly reconsiders meal sharing as a communal activity. Increasing our appreciation of food as a catalyst for social bonding would be a significant counterpart to the negative narrative that currently surrounds our eating behavior.

From our brief exposé of these novel developments in the food consumption literature, a number of themes emerge that could lead the research agenda. First and foremost, future studies should abandon their biased focus on the negative consequences of food consumption and spend more attention on when and why people enjoy food and how this impacts upon their mental and social well-being. Next, each of the four themes we discussed raises a number of specific questions that require further investigation. For example, we need to better understand how people can protect themselves from negative food attitudes that seem to be all around, how 'giving in once in a while' promotes an uncomplicated attitude towards food, how we can improve appreciation of healthy food in small quantities, how intuitive eating plays out in the long run, and how communal eating strengthens social relationships.

All in all, our review suggests that the existing focus on food overconsumption and its negative consequences needs to be distinguished from how normal levels of food consumption positively affect contentment, enjoyment, social bonds, and in the end, well-being in general. Notwithstanding concerns regarding overconsumption, a return to the notion of eating as a pleasurable activity seems to be on the rise. This perspective applies both to the revamp of the idea that eating holds positive consequences for well-being as well as to the understanding that being positive about eating may bring positive effects.

## Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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