



Understanding the Different Eating Skill Levels

Eating is a skill, and just like any other skill, there are different levels of proficiency. I believe that our biggest failure with nutrition is failing to see that there are these different skill levels. We have always assumed that “eating healthy” must mean to do and *be* all the things that are, in fact, very advanced. But, you must first master beginner level eating skills if you’d like to become a better eater, an eater that has a good attitude surrounding food, an eater that knows how to consistently make healthy food choices, and an eater that maintains these habits for the rest of their life.

Once you have mastered the beginner level eating skills, you may be ready and feel the necessity of moving on to the intermediate level eating skills. And the same process can continue to the advanced level eating skills. However, in most situations, the advanced eating skills may be completely superfluous for your own personal situation.

Beginner Level:

Starting Point:

- Zero to very little mindfulness or awareness surrounding food choices
- Eats haphazardly, inconsistently, mindlessly
- Minimal education and limited beliefs about healthy eating habits
 - Perhaps believing that healthy food is low calorie, or fat free, or just organic
 - Only experience with “eating healthy” is dieting

Beginner Eating Skills:

- Learning how to eat slowly and bringing more awareness to how food makes you feel, hunger cues, and fullness cues, and even thinking about some big picture effects of food, not just the immediate satisfaction
- If it’s a mealtime, deliberately stopping to feed yourself
- Choosing a PROtein source with every meal
- Choosing a PROduce source with every meal
- Starting to be mindful about the types of fats that you’re eating and looking for ways to include more variety
- Being aware of the starchier forms of carbohydrates
 - Aiming to always choose whole grain and nutrient-rich options
- Drinking water as your primary liquid source
- Becoming more mindful about your splurges

Beginner attitude changes and mindset shifts surrounding eating:

- The beginning stages of willpower and discipline
- Lots of grace and a good recognition that you won't do it perfectly, but to just keep trying
- Thinking long term and the "big picture" - the work you put in now to develop the beginner eating skills leads to big changes and good things in the future

Intermediate Level:

Starting Point:

- Consistently following the beginner eating skills
- Already have some good mindfulness and awareness about their food choices
- No longer eating haphazardly
- Have some good, sound beliefs around what healthy eating is and what it is not ("dieting")
- Feeling like they're ready and need some more skills to keep making progress toward their goals

Intermediate Eating Skills:

- Always eating slowly (~20 minutes/meal)
- Consistently exhibiting heightened awareness and big picture mindfulness
- More specific meal timing based on personal hunger cues
 - For most people, this means eating every 2-4 hours
- More intentional protein choices
 - Minimally processed, lean
 - One palm sized amount with every meal
- More intentional produce choices
 - Fresh
 - More vegetables than fruits
 - 2-3 servings with every meal
- More intentional with healthy fats
 - Saturated, Polyunsaturated, Monounsaturated
 - Deliberately eating more Omega-3 fatty acids
 - 1-2 thumb sized with most meals
- Paying closer attention to the starchier types of carbohydrates
 - Always eating whole grain, minimally processed, and nutrient-rich options
 - A goal-based approach
 - Weight loss?
 - Weight maintenance?
 - Weight gain?
- Beginning to be aware of personal body type and starting to make food choices based on it
- General understanding of proper workout nutrition
 - Intentional "peri-workout" meals based on the intensity of your workouts
 - Something high in protein and healthy carbohydrates to help encourage good recovery and maximize the training effect
- Drinking half your bodyweight in ounces of water daily
 - Paying attention to urine color and making adjustments
 - Avoiding calorie-containing beverages

- Monitoring your total splurges over the course of a day and a week
 - Understanding your goals and how many splurges are ok based on your goals
 - Being honest and disciplined, using a tracking chart for extra accountability
 - Lots of mindfulness surrounding splurging

Intermediate attitude changes and mindset shifts surrounding eating:

- Exhibiting strong levels of willpower and consistent discipline
- Continued grace and an understanding that you still aren't doing it perfectly, and that's ok
- Significantly more awareness around eating - a sense of confidence and capability in most situations
- Evidence that the "all-or-nothing" mindset is sloughing away

Advanced Level:

Starting Point:

- Consistently following the intermediate eating skills, or at the very least the beginner eating skills during times of maintenance, for quite a while now... often years
- Healthy eating is habitual and more natural than not eating healthy
- Consistently displaying confidence on what to choose and when...there is no doubt
- Every food choice is carefully considered and intentionally made, even if it's a splurge
- Having a good understanding of nutrients and their specific benefits in the body
- Clearly understanding balance and moderation and the pitfalls of a dieting mentality
- Feel like they're ready and may need some more skills to keep making progress toward their goals

Advanced Eating Skills:

- Choosing food sources with the specific purpose of its nutritional effects on your body – having a very high level of nutritional knowledge
 - Includes eating certain foods in coordination to help with absorption and digestion
- Eating for a specific body type accurately and consistently
 - Endomorph, Mesomorph, or Ectomorph
- Utilizing more specific portion sizing, calorie counting and/or macronutrient counting based on personal goals
- Intermittent fasting
- Eating a low-carb, high fat diet or eating a high-carb, low fat diet
 - Manipulating the balance of macronutrients to elicit certain results in our bodies
- Carb cycling
- Supplementing (beyond what your doctor specifically has prescribed)
 - Vitamins, minerals, and electrolytes
 - Energy supplements
 - Creatine, BCAA and EAA, Pre-workout drinks, Post-workout drinks

Advanced attitude changes and mindset shifts surrounding eating:

- The absolute highest levels of willpower and discipline
- Extreme awareness of "this moment's choices in light of everything else"
- Knowing how to manipulate and use food as fuel in the absolute best ways possible
- But also knowing how to turn that mindset off and actually enjoy food, too
 - Having a very strong understanding of balance and moderation
- Fully understanding that healthy eating should never equal perfection