

## [Yoga for Healthy Eating: An Overview](#)

by Nina

Both Baxter and I have already written a number of posts exploring the topic of Yoga for Healthy Eating. But seeing that it's the beginning of a new year—when people often make resolutions regarding their health—I thought now would be a good time to provide an overview of the topic. Basically, between the two of us, we've come up with a four-pronged approach to support healthy eating:

- Understand your digestive system
- Practice stress management
- Cultivate mindfulness
- Strengthen will power

### **1. Understanding Your Digestive System**

Baxter has recorded a short audio tour of the digestive system (see [Audio Tracks](#)) that you can use to learn about how your digestive system works and what happens to your food as and after you eat it. It's especially helpful for you to learn about how your digestive system interacts with your Autonomic Nervous System and higher brain function. When you're in a state of stress (see [Stress, Your Health and Yoga](#)), your nervous system diverts your body's resources away from your digestive system (you don't need to be eating or digesting your food when you're running away from that tiger or that car that looks like it's not going to be stopping before the crosswalk!). So chronic stress can cause digestive problems. In addition, even thinking about stressful situation can have a potential negative impact on digestion!

### **2. Practicing Stress Management**

Chronic stress may not only cause digestive problems as I mentioned above, but the cortisol that is released can cause weight gain by stimulating your appetite ([Yoga, Stress and Weight Management](#)). So one of the most important things you can do to improve digestion and move toward healthy eating is to use your yoga practice to reduce your stress levels. See [The Relaxation Response and Yoga](#) for basic information on using yoga to switch your nervous system from the Fight or Flight response (stress mode) to the Rest and Digest response (relaxation mode). It's not called the Rest and Digest mode for nothing!

### **3. Cultivating Mindfulness**

Many poor eating habits are just that—habits! Practicing yoga asana with mindfulness and meditating will help you tune into your body, and not to ignore it. And as you tune into your body, you may learn about foods you are currently eating that are compromising your health (see [Got Mindfulness?](#)) or notice poor eating habits, such as eating beyond satiety (see [Meditation and Healthy Eating](#)). Cultivating mindfulness can teach you to recognize:

- which foods are good for you and which are not (not just junk food, but maybe food intolerances or allergies)
- when you are full and don't need to eat more
- when you are thirsty instead of hungry
- when you are eating for stress, not for hunger

See [Yoga for Healthy Eating](#) for more information.

Mindfulness will also help you start to recognize habitual thoughts that are getting in the way of healthy eating. You can then work on changing your perspective (see [Cultivating the Opposite](#)).

#### **4. Strengthening Will Power**

Once you've identified your habits or have decide to eliminate or cut back certain foods, it takes will power to change! According the Dr. Kelly McGonigal, being in a state of stress can increase impulsive behavior and decrease will power. So practicing stress management as we describe above will help with your will power (see [Healthy Eating, Stress and Self Control](#)). However, you can also use a meditation practice to intentionally strengthen your will power. Meditation teaches you to return to your object of meditation (your focus) and tune out distractions (temptations):

*“Neuroscientists have discovered that when you ask the brain to meditate, it gets better not just at meditating, but at a wide range of self-control skills, including attention, focus, stress management, impulse control, and self awareness. People who meditate regularly aren't just better at these things. Over time, their brains become finely tuned willpower machines. Regular meditators have more gray matter in the prefrontal cortex, as well as regions of the brain that support self-awareness.” —Dr. Kelly McGonigal*

See [Meditation and Healthy Eating](#) for more information.