

Hunger: Your Best Friend

by E Douglas Kihn, Doctor of Oriental Medicine

Hunger is a feeling of emptiness in the upper abdomen that motivates animals and humans to venture into the wilderness and work for food so that starvation may be avoided. Hunger is the only reason animals and people bother to leave the comfort of their nests and homes to go to work. The hunger feeling only occurs in animals and humans who are healthy enough and lean enough, i.e. low on reserve calories, to perform hard physical and mental labor. Hunger does not manifest in animals and humans who are significantly overfed or who are incapacitated by injury or illness.

In pre-industrial cultures and in all times past, the concepts of "appetite" and "hunger" were considered one in the same. This is no longer the case. "Appetite" is the desire for food. Anyone can have an appetite. "Hunger" is the empty feeling in the abdomen and is reserved for the lean and fit. Americans typically assign the word "hunger" to a multiplicity of emotions, symptoms, and intellectual justifications. Hunger is routinely confused in the media with the serious conditions of starvation and malnutrition. But the fact is that no one ever died or got sick from hunger or any other feelings, since feelings are nothing else but information.

Scientists, the media, the experts, and everyone else encourage the avoidance and even the prevention of hunger. One reason is because the overuse of food generates huge profits for food corporations, the diet industry, and the medical industry. Imagine the tremendous profits lost worldwide if hundreds of millions of people stopped overeating and became lean and hungry. The economy would likely crash and burn. An indirect reason is that, unlike alcohol and drugs, food and fat help to sedate minds while allowing people to continue working and spending money. Imagine how upset and rebellious people might become if they weren't numbed out daily with excessive food and body fat.

Three Questions to Determine Hunger

Because people are so uniformly confused on the difference between hunger and appetite, and because no one else can feel what anyone else is feeling and there are no machines or blood tests yet that measure feelings, great care must be taken when determining whether someone really feels hunger. Ask yourself these three questions in the following order to determine whether or not you feel hunger.

1. Do you get hungry? If the answer is "yes" or "always," do not assume that you feel hunger. In fact, "always" usually

means "never." A nervous stomach, a burning stomach, nausea, or pain will often masquerade as hunger as well. Continue with the next question.

2. Where do you feel this sensation? If you answer, "in the upper abdomen," proceed with the final question. But any other answer indicates the absence of actual hunger.

3. What does your hunger feel like? If your answer is "an empty feeling," or "a hollow feeling," we can be eighty to ninety percent sure that you feel hunger. If your answer is anything else, you probably do not feel hunger.

Growling in the abdomen is not hunger. In fact, it might just be your intestines processing food. Burning, tightness, nausea, dizziness, fatigue, or any other physical symptoms are best treated with physical medicine, not food.

The Optimal Lean Zone

Over the course of three decades of clinical practice, I have discovered that the intensity of the hunger feeling is a measurement—a barometer—of how close a person is to their Optimal Lean Zone.

The OLZ is that range of body fat percentages which will afford an animal or human optimal summertime performance. Every

human and animal body requires a certain percentage of stored body fat in order to be healthy and to survive in the wilderness. Carrying more fat than is absolutely necessary would prevent a cheetah from catching a gazelle or escaping a predator for example, while retaining insufficient body fat would cause that animal to become cold and weak. Eventually it would starve, a morbid state in which the body cannibalizes its own muscle and bone for the emergency needs of the internal organs.

Over the years, professional bodybuilders and other athletes have determined that the OLZ for men ranges from 3% to 7% and for women from 7% to 12%. While in this zone, the digestion is strongest and generally capable of digesting everything that is humanly digestible. The muscles are the most powerful, reflexes are quickest, energy is highest, the five senses most perceptive, the thinking is most clear, the emotions most vivid, libido strongest, motivation most robust, the bowels and blood vessels are the cleanest, unwanted growths have been metabolized, and physical hunger the most apparent. Wild animals like cheetahs who function daily in their OLZ are only days away from starvation, and consequently must stay in tip-top shape to survive.

Excess body fat is one of five known causes of accelerated cellular aging (the other four being chronic anxiety, lack of

daily exercise, starvation, and cigarette smoking), as determined by the shortening of the chromosomal telomeres inside each nucleus of each body cell. When we examine human centenarians, we find that they are all lean and calm. For optimal health and longevity, the two factors must accompany one another.

As a body moves away from the OLZ, hunger and everything else related to the power of digestion diminish. This is why obese people and starving people alike—yin excess and yin deficiency respectively—have little or no hunger, and why a standard meal-sized portion of food given to an obese or starving person will always cause trouble. A weakened digestion that is either overfed or underfed causes “spleen qi deficiency” and simply cannot handle much food. Nor does that spleen want much food. An uncomfortable or even dangerous situation of food stagnation will likely result.

There is a great fear in the United States that fasting or not eating a prescribed number of meals will cause starvation. The concepts of hunger and starvation are often mistakenly associated. However it should be noted that nowhere in affluent cultures are there indications of epidemics of malnutrition diseases such as scurvy, beriberi, pellagra, kwashiorkor, or night blindness. Nor do vitamin and mineral deficiencies show up significantly in blood tests.

Making friends with the hunger feeling and welcoming it into your daily life will connect you with all of your feelings and thereby nurture self-trust and self-esteem. Becoming lean, calm, strong, and hungry will prepare you best for a long and healthy life.

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