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Here's How to Deal With Pesky Hunger Pangs

If your stomach is grumbling like this, it can only mean one thing.

BY [CHRISTINE BYRNE](#) NOV 30, 2021



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Hunger pangs—which you may have thought were called hunger pains until right now—aren't foreign to any of us. Even if you're not sure exactly what a hunger pang is, you've certainly felt one.

Maybe you tried some absurd diet that had you eating next to nothing, and your stomach audibly cried out for food by day two. Maybe the start of your day turned *really busy* and you forgot to eat all morning, only to notice serious grumbling coming from your midsection by the time lunch rolled around. Or, maybe you upped your workout routine without adding any extra snacks, and a few weeks in it started to feel like your gut was gnawing at itself on the inside. All of these are examples of hunger pangs in action.

But how are hunger pangs any different plain old hunger?

“Hunger pang, a term often misinterpreted as “hunger pain”, is a term that describes the general discomfort caused by the feeling of hunger, involving contractions of the stomach when it is empty,” says [Andrew Akhaphong, M.S.](#),

R.D., L.D., a retail dietitian for Mackenthun's Fine Foods.

Depending on the intensity of these contractions, a hunger pang can range from slightly unpleasant to downright painful. "Your abdomen may feel like it is being gnawed or have a general sense of emptiness," Akhaphong says. Or, you may feel sharp pains in the same area.

This happens for a reason: "Motilin is the hormone produced in the small intestine that triggers a hunger pang," says Krystal Dunham, RD, LD, owner of [The Mother Road Dietitian](#). Motilin causes your stomach and small intestine to contract, which is what creates the feeling of the hunger pang. Ghrelin, a hormone that stimulates appetite, is often released with motilin. So, in addition to feeling the physical contractions, you also start to feel hungry.

What does it mean when you have a hunger pang?

Simply put, a hunger pang is your body's way of telling you that it's time, or maybe past time, to eat. "A hunger pang is usually one of the last-ditch efforts your body uses to tell you it needs more food," Dunham says.

While various fad diets might tell you that hunger is something to be suppressed, this is absolutely not the case. "Definitely do not ignore a hunger pang," she says. "Recognizing hunger and a hunger pang means you are tuning into what your body needs in regards to nourishment."

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That said, a hunger pang can sometimes be a sign that you're thirsty, Akhaphong says. But don't fall into the trap of trying to dull true hunger by drinking water. If you've been drinking plenty of water—eight glasses a day is a good place to start, although [hydration really varies](#) from person to person and with your activity level each day—then that pang is probably a sign you need to eat.

How to deal with hunger pangs

Almost always, a hunger pang is a sign that it's time to eat. If you really think you might just be thirsty, drink a glass of water and see if the hunger pangs disappear within a few minutes. If they don't, you need some food.

If it's mealtime, great. But if not, a snack can help tide you over until it's time to sit down for something more substantial. "Choose a snack with a combination of fiber, protein, and fat such as cheese and mixed berries, a sandwich, or hummus and veggie sticks."

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And, whether you feel thirsty or not, it's a good idea to drink a glass of water (or another unsweetened beverage) as well.

Can you avoid hunger pangs?

Probably not.

In a perfect world, we would all keep ourselves properly fueled at all times. But in the real world, you're bound to let yourself go a little too long without eating on occasion, resulting in that gnawing hunger.

That said, hunger pangs shouldn't be something you feel all the time. There are other more subtle signs of hunger that show up before your stomach starts crying out for food.

"Hunger presents itself differently for everyone," Dunham says. "However, some signs of hunger include tiredness, lack of concentration, and irritability." And, she adds, the drop in your blood sugar that happens when you haven't eaten for a few hours can cause a quick shift in your mood. "You may even notice yourself suddenly becoming angry, short-tempered, annoyed, or being a real big jerk."

Bottom line? If you have hunger pangs, eat!

If you're constantly having hunger pangs, it's probably a sign that you're not eating enough overall. Make sure you're eating at least three meals a day, and add snacks as needed when you feel the signs of hunger come on. If you're already eating consistently and still can't alleviate hunger pangs, try adding more fiber to your meals.

"A dietary pattern high in fiber from whole grain sources like whole wheat bread, fresh fruits and vegetables, nuts and seeds, or brown rice can help sustain regular levels of insulin (which impacts blood sugar) and the hunger hormone, ghrelin," Akhaphong says.

But the occasional hunger pang is a totally natural response that happens when your body needs more energy from food. When a gnawing feeling overtakes your stomach, don't second guess it—just grab a snack and eat.

CHRISTINE BYRNE

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