

Intuitive Eating **For Fitness**

Finding a Personalized Approach to
Optimally Fuel Your Body and Mind



Kelly Jones, MS, RD, CSSD, LDN

Intuitive Eating?

What's That?

By letting go of society's idea of what and when you should be eating, and unlearning behaviors you've built since early childhood, intuitive eating lets you get back to fueling your body with what it wants and needs to feel and perform it's best.

There are 10 standard evidence based principles of intuitive eating, coined by registered dietitians Evelyn Tribole and Elyse Resch in 1995. While not everyone needs to hoan in on all of the 10 principles of intuitive eating to improve their behaviors, energy levels, and relationship with food, many people need to ditch diet rules and ignore the food police before paying attention to their internal cues. Years of dieting (following any eating pattern or restrictive behavior for weight loss maintenance or because it is perceived as "better") can blunt the body's ability to listen to what it really needs, as well as negatively impact mental health, digestive function, and energy metabolism.

For many individuals, honoring hunger (your physiological need for food) is a main step in intuitive eating. So is honoring your fullness and feeling satisfaction. But, don't be fooled by those who don't truly understand intuitive eating and may market it as a hunger and fullness diet. IE embraces that we aren't perfect and, for example, sometimes we mess up and don't eat when we're hungry, which can lead to overeating later. This isn't a failure, it is just an opportunity to reflect on the experience, recognize what could have gone differently and be better prepared next time. It also doesn't mean that you shouldn't try new foods or eating at new times. For example, if you rarely eat breakfast and you get by day to day, it doesn't mean you won't feel much better by adding in a morning meal. Then you likely will feel better by taking steps to focus on obtaining a proper balance of nutrients at this time to fuel your day.

This is where "gentle nutrition" comes in.



Intuitive Eating?

For Fitness?!

The 10 Principles are an excellent starting point, but are also general. These principles may need to be interpreted differently person to person and/or be tweaked for a variety of populations. While athletes certainly have a variety of factors to consider in applying the 10 principles to their life, anyone with an activity level above the recommended 30 minutes, most days a week, may want to pay special attention to the applications of the principles discussed here.

Often, individuals who are athletes or engage in high levels of activity may follow prescriptive diets in an effort to improve performance or aesthetics.

Unfortunately, this typically means inadequate nutrition for their physically demanding lifestyle, since dietary patterns are rarely tailored to that individual's training plan, lifestyle outside of exercise, food preferences, age, or genetics, among other factors.

Since much of the evidence based information in sports nutrition (most done on elite male athletes in a laboratory setting) usually leads to strict dietary recommendations, it can seem as though intuitive eating and nutrition for athletic performance don't go hand in hand.

However, active individuals are at a much higher risk for disordered eating, and potentially eating disorders than the general population. These are what the 10 principles of intuitive eating were originally curated to prevent and treat. Therefore, it can be helpful for practitioners to use interventions that improve not only performance and physical health, but also mental health to eliminate incidences of disordered eating (even if an individual does not yet recognize they exist).

The integration of intuitive eating and sports/fitness nutrition does just that.



The 10 Principles

Adjusted for Athletes and Active Individuals

1. Reject the Diet Mentality

Whether an athlete does a juice cleanse to “make weight” or a recreationally active person goes on a keto diet to look thinner, restrictive diets are riskier for the fit population than for the non-active population. Active individuals must understand the negative effects of these diets, such as dehydration, low blood sugar and mental health effects, poor immunity, and higher risk of injury. This knowledge brings a better understanding of the higher nutritional needs for the demands they put on their bodies.

2. Honor Your Hunger

It's common for people with lack of knowledge in nutrition to say they wish they weren't hungry after exercise. This indicates the individual is active with the primary goal of weight loss, rather than performance or the many other benefits of exercise, and is likely underfueling; this harms metabolism as well as drives up injury risk. On the other hand, many athletes deal with post-exercise appetite suppression after long or intense bouts of physical activity. It's essential to be aware of sports nutrition science to encourage nutrient replacement soon after exercise and to recognize symptoms of hunger other than an empty stomach.

3. Make Peace with Food

Both food rules and food rituals are common with athletes and active people. Media, the culture of a sport, and recommendations from teammates, friends, and even coaches or trainers can produce these thoughts. Remember that dietitians advocate for balancing the “all foods fit” mentality with an understanding that certain nutrients must be consumed in higher or lower amounts before and during exercise to avoid gastrointestinal discomfort and subsequent low energy levels.

4. Challenge the Food Police

Athletes and active clients look to coaches and trainers for nutrition advice more often than RDs, but because those professionals are not trained in nutrition, some may get their information from supplement companies and the media. This influence can cause active individuals to fear certain nutrients and eating patterns, or even adequate energy intake. Scope of practice is essential and often overlooked here (you wouldn't hire an accountant as your lawyer) and a healthful and adequate diet for an athlete is altogether different from that for the general population.

The 10 Principles *Adjusted for Athletes and Active Individuals*

5. Respect Your Fullness

If an athlete gets to the point of overeating by having excessively large meals, it's often due to low energy intake throughout the day or strenuous endurance exercise. With adequate energy intake before and during a long workout, athletes can avoid feeling the need to eat quickly and impulsively, enabling them to pay better attention to fullness. You may be able to eat more mindfully later by consuming adequate, balanced, and frequent snacks during the day while fueling during long or intense workouts.

6. Discover the Satisfaction Factor

Along with getting enough fuel throughout the day, mindfully enjoying foods that were previously “off limits” on a regular basis can leave you feeling more mentally content and satisfied than when you restrict those foods and then binge. With athletes, there may be a need for additional knowledge about timing of treats around workouts and competitions, depending on their fat content, or pairing a small portion of a treat with an adequate protein source post-workout.

7. Honor Feelings without Using Food

Athletes and the active population are also prone to high stress and anxiety. For some, this leads to under-eating and loss of appetite, but for others it can lead to overeating as a distraction or coping mechanism. It's essential that active individuals find healthful outlets to manage stress such as yoga, meditation, or breaks from their sport during the year.

8. Respect Your Body

Females are prone to feeling insecure in a lean body that's more muscular than the average woman, or in a body that's not as lean as a professional in their sport or a stranger in a fitness class. Respecting your body's differences are essential - remember muscles provide you the strength to achieve goals and fat mass is more linked to genetic factors than any other. Your genes are not the same as a gold medalist or a runner in your neighborhood. Avoid comparing your body with that of a leaner athlete or female.

9. Exercise - Know the Difference

Are you active only because not exercising intensely makes you anxious? Do you force a second exercise class simply to burn more calories, not because it's enjoyable? Many active individuals need to reflect and remind themselves why they exercise, and what it is they enjoy about physical activity and competition so they can understand the concepts of mindful and joyful movement.

10. Honor Your Health

Food and exercise should make you feel good. If you are constantly getting sick or injured, it's an indication your diet is inadequate and, therefore, not supporting your activity. In active females, inadequate nutrition can lead to irregular periods or cause them to stop altogether. There are short and long-term consequences of menstrual dysfunction that cannot be ignored, including infertility and bone loss.

Kelly Jones

MS, RD, CSSD, LDN

Kelly Jones is a media and consulting dietitian based in greater Philadelphia. With degrees in nutrition and exercise physiology, and a board certification in sports nutrition, her expertise lies in performance nutrition for collegiate and professional athletes as well as busy, active adults. When consulting with sports organizations and food companies, Kelly ensures that nutrition marketing messages are based in sound science while offering tips that apply to everyday life.

Kelly has a whole food, plant-forward approach to nutrition, while encouraging intuitive eating and flexibility to optimally fuel the body and mind. As mom and former Division I athlete, who continues to enjoy most forms of fitness, she helps her audience integrate better nutrition and joyful movement into their lifestyle in realistic and sustainable ways.

Kelly is also the co-creator of the online course: FitFueling: Intuitive Eating for Active Females.



Find her recipes and tips for fueling an active lifestyle at [KellyJonesNutrition.com](https://www.KellyJonesNutrition.com) or by following her on Instagram @KellyJonesRD or Facebook @KellyJonesNutrition.