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Weight Loss & Obesity

# What Is Food Noise and How Can You Quiet It?

Medically Reviewed by [Brunilda Nazario, MD](#) on September 21, 2023 |  
 Written by [Barbara Brody](#)

When Food Noise Becomes a Problem Why Willpower Doesn't Cut It

Other Ways to Quiet Food Noise More Coverage of Obesity

4 min read

Nikki Levy opened the DoorDash app on her phone, craving Vietnamese food. Then she remembered the 95% fat-free turkey she'd defrosted: She could cook instead of ordering in. She closed the app and then reopened it, over and over. "I can go back and forth like this for an hour," she says.

Levy, a Los Angeles-based content executive and story coach, recently rejoined [WW](#) (formerly called Weight Watchers). She'd lost 35 pounds on WW before her 2019 wedding. Some of that weight was back, and intrusive food thoughts made it hard to stick with the plan.

This is the internal chatter that's sometimes called "food noise." It doesn't have an official definition. Levy calls it a "barrage" of thoughts that nudge her toward the food she craves. "I'll eat the thing and be revitalized and everything will be better," Levy says. "But it never actually is."

There are ways to turn down the volume on food noise, with or without the newest type of [obesity](#) medication.

## When Food Noise Becomes a Problem

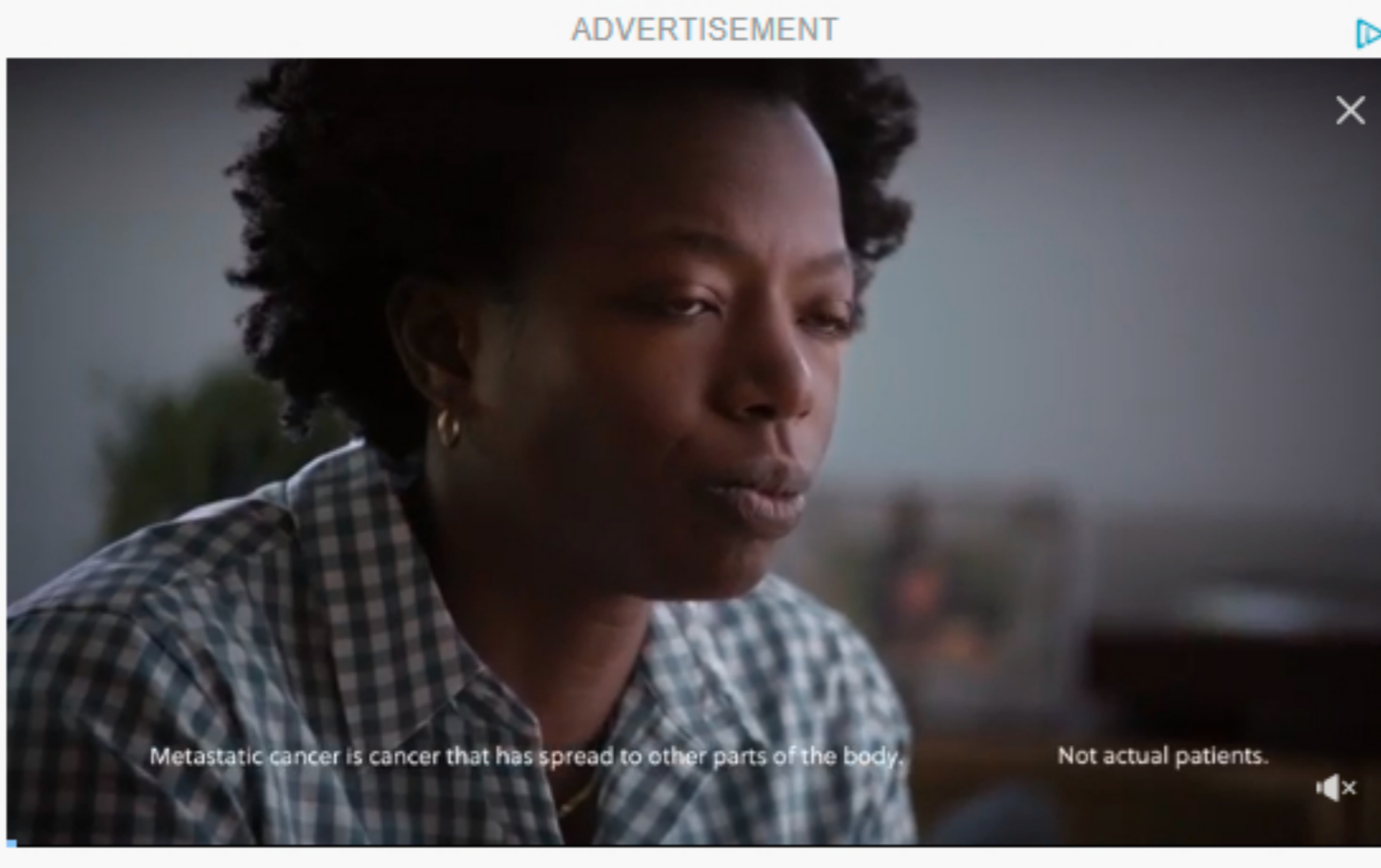
Everyone thinks about food to some extent. We all need calories and nutrients to survive. Plus, food is part of all cultures and a source of enjoyment.

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But thoughts about food can become excessive and harmful.

"It often comes up with patients," says Steven Batash, MD, founder of Batash Endoscopic Weight Loss Center in Queens, NY. "Some people become almost dysfunctional because all they think about all day is food."

A key issue is how we respond to our food noise, says David Creel, PhD, a psychologist, registered dietitian, and exercise physiologist at Cleveland Clinic. "It can certainly be a problem," Creel says, if it prompts unhealthy eating and leads to, or worsens, obesity or other medical conditions.



## Why Willpower Doesn't Cut It

Many things affect weight, including genetic, social, cultural, economic, and environmental influences. Psychology is also part of it.

Thoughts about food can be triggered by internal cues (including hormones involved in hunger and appetite) and external ones (like smelling freshly baked cookies or seeing a fast-food ad). Both can contribute to food noise, Creel says.

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If food noise is overwhelming and your body mass index (BMI) is in the obesity range, the newest obesity medications may be an option. These meds, called glucagon-like peptide 1 (GLP-1) agonists, include semaglutide.

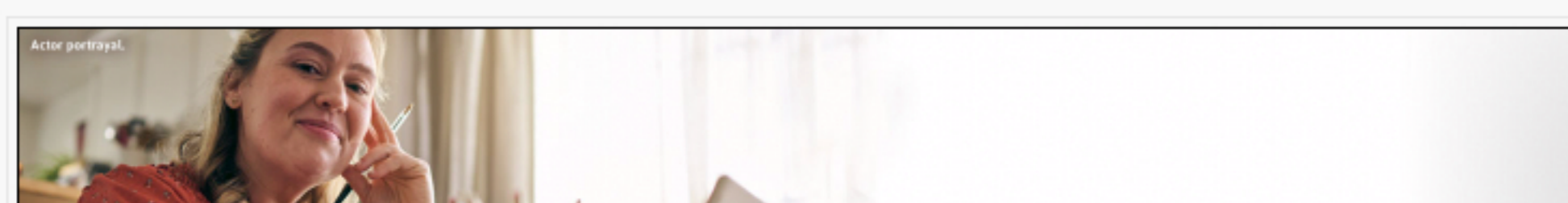
Semaglutide was developed to treat type 2 diabetes. It still does that under the brand name Ozempic. It's also the active ingredient in the obesity medication Wegovy.

GLP-1 agonists like semaglutide slow down how quickly food leaves the stomach. That makes you feel full longer.

These meds also target brain areas involved in appetite. In a small study, people with obesity who took semaglutide ate less and their cravings for sugar and high-fat snacks dimmed.

It's not yet clear if that happens for everyone taking these meds. But in his clinic, Batash says, "Patients tell me, 'I no longer think about food all the time.'"

He describes several theories about how this may happen. These drugs may stimulate the hypothalamus, a brain area that plays a role in controlling hunger and fullness. They may also block the release of the brain chemical dopamine. That makes food less rewarding.



The effect is temporary, Batash cautions. Stop the medication and the food noise is likely to return.

Creel agrees that these medications can help. But he says they're best used with other approaches.

"I don't think medication will solve things permanently for most people long-term, so being able to change your relationship with food is really important," Creel says. "Medication doesn't make you exercise, control what you put in your shopping cart, or dictate what you do when you're bored."

## Other Ways to Quiet Food Noise

If you want to curb food noise without obesity medications – such as if you shouldn't take them, your [insurance won't cover them](#), or you're wary of the [side effects](#) – you have options. As with medication, none of these alone are a perfect solution, but they may help, Creel and Batash say.

**Work on stress and sleep.** When you're anxious, irritable, or not rested, you may think more about food because eating temporarily makes you feel better, Batash says.

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Find positive ways to [manage stress](#) and anxiety, such as [deep breathing exercises](#), spending time in nature or with loved ones, or being physically active. Depending on your situation, mental health counseling and treatment may also help.

**Eat more often.** If you get too hungry or deprive yourself of food, that may spur food noise – and trigger overeating when you finally give yourself permission to eat, Batash says. His advice: Stay hydrated, try to eat three to four times a day, and get enough protein and fiber to help you feel full.

**Tweak your environment.** You can't control everything in your surroundings. So focus on what you can change. For instance, if ice cream is a food you'd like to limit, don't put it front and center in the freezer where you see it all the time, Creel says.

**Look for patterns.** Notice when food noise is loudest and most problematic. If it's while streaming shows, could you watch in a part of your home that's not close to the kitchen? "The goal is to break the habit so you don't evoke the same hunger and desire to eat," Creel says.

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**Eat more mindfully.** Slow down and curb distractions. Engage all your senses and chew thoroughly. Savor each bite and stop eating when you feel satisfied.

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