

Best Bets for Low-Calorie Snacking

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It's 4 p.m. Is that your tummy growling? If it is — and you're already grabbing a treat to quiet it down — you may fall into the largest category of snackers.

Three in 10 of us get the munchies in the midafternoon, according to a 2006 survey by the New York-based market research firm NPD Group. After-dinner or late-night snacking is reported by only about 20% of Americans, while 13% of us find our stomachs rumbling by midmorning, the survey found.

Don't feel guilty: Giving in to the urge isn't necessarily a bad thing.

"Eating a small meal or snack every 3 to 4 hours actually helps maintain energy and blood sugar levels," says Seattle registered dietitian Lola O'Rourke, a spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association.

The best kind of snack is one that contains protein like cheese and nuts because it will leave you feeling full for a longer time, O'Rourke says. Ditto for a snack with fiber; the body requires more time to digest a high-fiber food, which means a longer time before you feel hungry again.

Of course, not all snacks are created equal. Sugary foods like chocolate or candy may stave off hunger pangs briefly, but they actually work against you in the long run.

"Sugar just makes you hungry sooner," says Andrea Giancoli, a Los Angeles-based dietitian who specializes in family nutrition. "Snacks that have a lot of refined sugar like a candy bar get digested quickly, so you get a surge of glucose — but then it's gone."

Giancoli, who counsels families and has a nutrition blog called "The Family Fork," says snacking is best earlier in the day when energy levels are at their highest. "Eating makes us feel satisfied sooner in the morning ... it takes longer to feel satisfied as the day goes on. That's why I tell people to front-load their day with food and to skip late-night eating."

How to choose wisely

Why is selection so important? Plain and simple, weight gain is often the result of eating more calories than we need in a day, says obesity expert James Hill, Ph.D., director of the Center for Human Nutrition at the University of Colorado and author of *The Step Diet Book: Count Steps, Not Calories to Lose Weight and Keep It Off Forever* (Workman Publishing, 2004). Eating something healthful when your stomach starts to growl can prevent you from overeating at the next meal.

"Look for snack foods packaged in 100-calorie packs," Hill suggests. Once in a while you can treat yourself to 100 calories of chocolate. But on other days, he says: "Have 100 calories of fruit or nuts or even vegetables. That way, you won't take the fun out of snacking, but you'll move toward an overall healthier diet."

So imagine — it's 10 a.m. Breakfast is a distant memory, lunch is still too far off, but your stomach is saying "feed me." Or maybe you've hit that energy sag at around 4 p.m., and every vending machine within 500 feet is calling your name. What should you do? Here's what our snack attack advisors suggest:

- Keep sweets small. If you just have to have something sweet, first consider eating some protein and then finish up with a small treat like a Hershey's kiss, a piece of hard candy or some gum, Giancoli says. "Something small will give you the hit of sweetness you desire but without a lot of calories."
- Be a cereal snacker. Choose a breakfast cereal that has fewer than 5 grams of sugar and at least 3 grams of dietary fiber, O'Rourke suggests. Have a serving with low-fat milk. Consider putting a portion of your cereal in a re-sealable bag to keep for munching at your desk or in the car.
- Managing the machine. If you're starving and a vending machine is all that's available, a small bag of nuts provides healthy protein and fiber despite the higher calorie and fat load. Opt for pretzels or fat-free microwave popcorn over potato chips, O'Rourke advises.
- Don't drink your calories, but do drink. Liquids help fill you up — just make sure they don't have too many calories, Giancoli says. Skip regular soda, which piles on more than 100 calories and has zero nutrients. Fruity-flavored drinks with 10% fruit juice or less aren't much better. Stick to no-cal options like water, diet soda, tea or coffee.
- Beware of granola and energy bars. With the high sugar and salt content and refined flour found in granola and energy bars, "they're like candy bars using an alias," says David L. Katz, M.D., M.P.H., a professor of public health at Yale University in New Haven, Conn., and author of *The Flavor Point Diet: The Delicious Breakthrough Plan to Turn Off Your Hunger and Lose the Weight For Good* (Random House, 2005). The best bars include whole grains (like oats) listed among the first 3 ingredients and that have at least 2 grams of fiber. "Those meeting these criteria include LaraBar, Odwalla bars and products by Barbara's Bakery, Nature's Choice, Nature's Path, Kashi and Healthy Valley," Katz says.
- Portions, please. Measure out single portions. But don't guess at how much you should eat, or that snack can turn into a meal. Ideal calories for a healthful snack: 200 or less.

No-fail favorites

Keep these under-200-calorie snacks handy in your travels:

- 2 cups fat-free popcorn (or buy 100-calorie packs for microwaving)
- Single-serve instant oatmeal
- Whole-wheat crackers (reduced-fat Triscuits are good)
- Energy bars with less than 200 calories (Luna, Kashi, 100-calorie Balance)
- Whole-grain, ready-to-eat cereal (Oatmeal Squares, MultiGrain Cheerios)
- Sliced apple or celery sticks with 1 tablespoon peanut butter
- Snack-size light yogurt or fat-free pudding (4 to 6 ounces)

- Snack-size low-fat cottage cheese packs
- Single-serving size bag (about ¼ cup) nuts (almonds, soy nuts, pistachios, walnuts)
- Any whole fruit
- Serving of soy chips
- Single stick of string cheese
- Fruit leathers, or flat strips of puréed dried fruit
- Single serving of dried fruit and nut mix

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