

## Smart Snacking 101

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People's view of snacking is as varied as the snacks they choose. While some see snacking as a surefire way to spoil an appetite or as an excuse to sneak junk food into your life, others find that they simply cannot make it between lunch and dinner without some sort of pick me up. Athletes often discover that their performance, stamina and energy levels are enhanced by munching on something before a workout, and many children need to snack in between meals in order to meet their higher nutritional needs.

What's the skinny on snacking? And what kinds of snacks should you be eating? Snacks play a healthy role in fueling our bodies, as well as maintaining blood sugar and energy levels. It is also an opportunity to help round out your diet and meet your body's nutrition needs that aren't met at mealtimes. For instance, snacking on fruit and yogurt may help you to meet your needs from the dairy and fruit groups, while enjoying some nuts or dried fruit will boost your intake of heart healthy fats, protein, fiber and iron.

Snacking is also a key strategy in preventing overeating at night. I commonly see clients who do not eat enough throughout the day, either due to a lack of time or else the mistaken "diet by day" mentality. By the time they arrive home these people are ravenous and ready to eat anything in sight. This sets them up for making poor food choices, as it is much easier to reach for the cookie jar than to take the time to prepare a balanced meal.

Snack foods proliferate in our culture, convincing us that we should be noshing on an array of chips, dips, cookies or crackers whenever the urge strikes us. The food industry, which has created this niche in the first place, cleverly markets their products to convince consumers that this is indeed what snacking was made for: high fat, high calorie, high sodium food choices that stack up to little more than "empty calories" from a nutrition standpoint.

Yet if you base your snacks on a couple of basic strategies, they can be a healthy addition to your diet.

**Strategy #1:** Keep it light. Remember that snacks should be just that, snacks, not meals. Snacking on an entire bag of chips or a box of cookies can easily gobble up 500-1000 calories. If you are planning to eat a meal within 2 hours, try to keep snacks under 250 calories. For example, have 2 graham crackers with some peanut butter, vegetable sticks with yogurt dip, or 1 cup of a fruit smoothie.



**Strategy #2:** Let the pyramid be your guide. Choose whole foods from the food guide pyramid rather than processed snack foods. Fresh fruit, whole grain crackers, and yogurt will provide you with added nutrition and will keep your energy levels high, while soda, chips and cookies may cause you to feel sluggish and contribute little more than excess calories.

**Strategy #3:** Choose a combination of fat, protein and carbohydrate. Fat and protein take longer to digest than carbohydrate and will help you to feel fuller and more satisfied. An easy way to do this is to include at least 2 food groups in your snacks. For instance, have a small slice of cheese with an apple or some tuna salad with whole grain crackers.

**Strategy #4:** Use snacks as a chance to get food groups that you're missing. Have trouble getting enough calcium in your diet? Try packing some yogurt to work, have a fat free pudding, or down a smoothie. Do you rarely eat vegetables? Bring a V-8 juice, have some carrots with hummus, or some baked chips with salsa.

**Strategy #5:** Plan to have healthy snacks on hand. The old adage, "if you don't have it, you won't eat it" certainly holds true. Stock up on healthy snack options so that you will have them at a moment's notice, and pack healthy snacks into backpacks, briefcases and gym bags. If you know that you have something healthy and ready to go you will be less inclined to run to the vending machine.