

Grazed and Confused

Simply can't fathom how you've packed on the pounds drinking smoothies and chomping kale chips? The once-healthy snack "break" has morphed into a round-the-clock munchfest. Time to break the cycle.

By Marygrace Taylor



Too much of a good thing... sucks.

WEIGHT LOSS

“How many times have you eaten today?” Should be a quick answer, but for a lot of people, it’s not so simple. There was that handful of raisins in the car. And the yogurt at the morning meeting. The popcorn at 2 p.m., the granola bar at 4 p.m.... you get it. With the aim of eating healthier and cutting cal, we’ve replaced three big meals with more frequent snacks. Problem is, they’ve become *too* frequent: Per one new study, the average person now eats up to 15 times over the course of 15 hours (!).

Surprise, surprise—the same research found that nonstop chomping has nothing to do with hunger. “There’s definitely a smart way to snack,” says Lisa Young, R.D., Ph.D., author of *The Portion Teller Plan*. “But it’s easy to take it, even with healthy foods, too far.” And in addition to a widening waistline, eating 24/7 can have other, more serious health implications.

THE DAWN OF SNACKS

The three-squares-a-day model of eating evolved with the 9-to-5 workday. Prior to the 1950s, snacks were as foreign a concept as “weekends” to a dowager countess. “Eating between meals only happened on special occasions, like having birthday cake,” says

Barry Popkin, Ph.D., a professor of nutrition at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Gradually, though, many nutrition pros began to suspect that chowing just thrice a day wasn’t the best idea. It can lead to stuffing yourself when you finally do eat, and the huge glucose dump from larger meals causes insulin to spike and fall, which can actually stimulate appetite.

The occasional snack or mini meal would help ward off

binge-triggering hunger and keep your blood sugar and energy levels steady. When an explosion of convenience foods made it possible to fill up without missing a beat, set meal times went kaput.

MOUTHS WIDE OPEN

But then those mini meals started getting bigger. And more frequent. And habit-forming. “When you nibble all the time, you’re less conscious of what and how

much you’re eating,” says Young. A recent Nielsen survey found that nearly 60 percent of munch sessions are totally unplanned. Even if you stick to healthy fare, eating more often makes it tough to keep track of calories.

Sure enough, the amount of cal we take in from snacks has ballooned, from fewer than 300 a day in the 1970s to around 450 today. That’s a difference that can add up to nearly 16 pounds a year!



NOSHING: A HISTORY

In the national popularity contest for snacks, these have taken the cake.



1950s
GRAHAM CRACKERS



1960s
POTATO CHIPS AND POPCORN



1970s
MALTED MILK BALLS AND CHOCOLATE-COVERED RAISINS



1980s
CHOCOLATE CANDIES



1990s
LOW-FAT COOKIES



2000s
MICROWAVE POPCORN AND 100-CALORIE SNACK PACKS



2010s
GRANOLA BARS AND ENERGY BARS

DOUGLAS LYLE THOMPSON/GALLERY STOCK (WOMAN); GETTY IMAGES (GRAHAM CRACKERS); ISTOCK (POTATO CHIPS, MALTED MILK BALLS); ALAMY (CHOCOLATE CANDIES, COOKIES, POPCORN); JUANNONINO/ISTOCK (ENERGY BAR)

WEIGHT LOSS

When Snacks Attack: Coming soon to a theater near you!

Never actually working up an appetite can compound the problem. Even the best burger is a letdown when you're just not hungry. And when you're not satisfied, you're more likely to keep grazing, says Keri Gans, R.D., author of *The Small Change Diet*. Worse, research has found that flooding your body with a near-constant supply of calories may cause your liver to store more fat, which could lead to insulin resistance and increase your risk for type 2 diabetes.

CHEW ON THIS

Despite these grim facts, we're not advocating for a return to *Mad Men*-era mealtimes. Done right, snacking can deliver on those promises to boost energy and keep hunger in check. Follow this wisdom to get your nibbles in order.

» LISTEN TO YOUR GUT.

Literally—if your belly isn't sending out feed-me rumbles, don't eat. Recent research found that 62 percent of Americans say they snack because of cravings, a quarter blame boredom, and another 16 percent chalk it up to stress.

» **KEEP THE BREAK, LOSE THE SNACK.** "For many people, a break in their day is just another excuse to eat," says Gans. Undo the association between downtime and food by planning time to unwind around an activity like taking a walk or a quick round of Candy Crush Saga.

» SHOW UP EMPTY-HANDED.

Keeping a bag of trail mix in the car for hunger emergencies sounds smart—until you polish it off the first time you're stuck in traffic. "We're biologically wired to want to eat food the second we see it," says Susan Roberts, Ph.D., a professor of nutrition at Tufts University. Out of sight means out of mouth.

» DIVIDE AND CONQUER.

Take the total number of calories you should be getting in a day and divide it by

how often you eat. If you stick to just three meals, each can be pretty large (around 660 calories for a 2,000-calorie-a-day diet). But if you find yourself needing to graze at least once before lunch and again before dinner, you should be aiming for 500 calories per meal and 250 cals per snack.

» **GO WHOLE.** The goal of a snack is to fuel you until your next meal. Minimally processed foods are best at this, especially when they pack at least two of these three nutrients: protein, fiber, and healthy fat. Just don't forget that portions matter too, since things like nuts and dairy can be calorie dense (which is one of the reasons they're so satisfying). Even in smaller amounts, you'll be surprised how well these foods can ward off tummy grumble.

CRAVE O'CLOCK

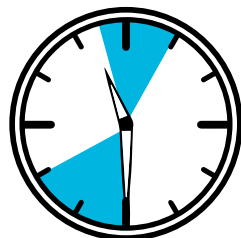
Time may tell which munchies you're in the mood for, according to new research. To outsmart cravings, plan ahead: Forty percent of snacks eaten away from home are of the better-for-you variety (think fruit). Reason? People tend to pack food that helps them resist less-healthy options.



11:30 A.M. TO 1 P.M.

Savory snacking peaks

Yeah, it's lunchtime and you're hungry. But if you supplement with snacks, make sure your main meal is smaller—don't just swap junk for healthy food.



6 TO 8 P.M.

Sweet snacking peaks

Always hitting the ice cream after dinner? Odds are, you're not even really hungry; you're just using sugar as a reward. Tame that sweet tooth with frozen grapes.

Sources: Marisa Moore, R.D., and Darren Seifer, food and beverage industry analyst at NPD Group

SIGNED, SEALED, DELICIOUS

Adios, vending-machine regret! These edible subscription services deliver the goods—no junk mail in sight.

Use code **WHDEAL** for 50% off your first Bestowed/WH box.



BESTOWED

bestowed.com/wh

We've partnered with Bestowed to bring you our fave healthy snacks and drinks.

Nom on: Ginger-peanut quinoa clusters, vanilla-maple almonds

One-month price: From \$21 for a seven- to 10-snack box and a WH subscription



LOVE WITH FOOD

lovewithfood.com

Chew with a purpose:

For every box of surprise, all-natural goodies you get, a meal is donated to a hungry child.

Nom on: Chia-seed bars, black-bean chips

One-month price: From \$8 for an eight-snack box



GRAZE

graze.com

Choose from 100-plus R.D.-approved picks, then rate them so your next batch is even more to your taste.

Nom on: Chili-lime cashews, strawberries-and-cream trail mix

One-month price: From \$12 for a four-snack box



NATUREBOX

naturebox.com

No artificial ingredients, and the fare is guaranteed, so you get a replacement in your next box for anything you don't like.

Nom on: Sriracha popcorn, pistachio power clusters

One-month price: From \$10 for a five-snack box ■