

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Snack Smarts for You and Your Family

It's two hours to dinner and that rumble in your belly is leading you to the snack cupboard. But before you reach for those deep-fried or sugary treats, remember that snacking doesn't have to be a guilty pleasure. In fact, eating small amounts of healthy food between meals can keep you energized, help your body get the nutrients it needs, stop you from overeating and even keep you trim. Whether you're eight, 38 or 80, “snack attacks” that follow proper food guides can be a healthy addition to your nutritional regime.

Snacking for kids

Children and teens—with their active lifestyles, rapid growth and development—need extra calories and nutrients. Protein, calcium, fiber and iron are especially important. Pick snacks that give kids a healthy start, like popcorn with added nuts, whole wheat crackers with cheese slices, homemade oatmeal raisin cookies, dried fruit or trail mix.

Plan ahead. Try stocking cupboards with easy options like low-sodium, high-fiber crackers and rice cakes. Cut up fruit and vegetables and store them in containers with cold water so they're easy to grab and serve. Pair with low-fat yogurt for a flavor and calcium boost. By planning ahead and only keeping healthy choices around, you won't be tempted to serve less-wholesome options.

Be sneaky. Find creative ways to boost the nutritional value of your kids’ favorite snacks. Make mini-pizza snacks using whole-wheat pitas or English muffins, skip the fat-laden pepperoni and load them up with veggies. Make your own trail mix using nuts, seeds, dried fruit and whole-grain cereal, and opt for smoothies made with fruit, yogurt and unsweetened juice.

Walk the talk. You can't expect kids to savor a bowl of fruit while you wolf down chocolate cake, so set a good example. Snack well yourself and reserve less nutritious snack options (for you and your children) as occasional treats.

Snacking for adults

As adulthood sets in and your metabolism begins to slow, you may be shocked to discover that frequent unhealthy snack choices are beginning to take their toll on your body. If weight gain, overeating or high cholesterol sound familiar, get back to basics: the four food groups.

Become whole again. Avoid sugary snacks, which lead you to crash and burn as blood sugar levels spike and then bottom out. Instead, opt for whole grains and lean proteins, which have true staying power. Try whole-wheat crackers or bread with peanut butter, baked tortilla chips and salsa, a handful of almonds, or fresh fruit or vegetables with skim milk cheese.

Make time. It can be easy to skip meals and snacks, but depriving your body of food leads to low blood pressure, and tricks your body into starvation mode, slowing your metabolism and leading to weight gain. Keep carrots, celery or almonds on hand for a quick pick-me-up when you feel your energy drop.

Eat when you’re hungry. Whether it's a rumbling stomach, hunger pains or low energy, listen to your body and learn its hunger cues to avoid overeating and poor food choices. And beware of confusing thirst for hunger. Since the brain can sometimes mix up these messages, drink plenty of water throughout the day.

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As people age, lowered activity levels and a slowing metabolism can cause the body's response to food to change. Old food favorites may cause indigestion, leave you feeling downright ill or cause weight gain. Snacking can be an ideal option, helping to ensure you're getting vital nutrition to keep your bones and muscles strong, and your energy levels up.

Less means more. Because you may eat less, what you eat becomes that much more important. Snack on foods that provide the essential nutrients: low-fat yogurt or soy milk for a calcium boost; fortified whole-grain cereal, figs, dried apricots or pumpkin seeds for a shot of iron; or a handful of almonds or walnuts for a daily dose of omega 3.

Fiber up. Grazing on whole grains—whole-wheat crackers, toast and whole-grain cereals—and raw fruits and vegetables such as carrots and celery, not only provide vital nutrients, but the roughage you need to avoid constipation (a common problem among older adults). Accompany with eight glasses of water daily to help keep things moving.

Get help. If mobility concerns are getting in the way of meal preparation or shopping, enlist your family members' help, use a grocery store that delivers, or look into programs that can deliver meals to your door.

Healthy snacking at any age is a great way to ensure your body gets what it needs to fend off illness and maintain wellness.