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On Track With a Snack

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Mindful munching between meals can help control cravings and promote portion control. Help clients take a healthful bite out of hunger with these handy hints.

Many of your clients might be surprised to learn they can snack their way to better health. Snacking has long been associated with weight gain and unhealthy eating habits. Of course, there is good reason for that. Research recently published in **Health Affairs** suggested that snacking may be largely to blame for the childhood obesity epidemic. American kids snack on junk foods three times per day, accounting for more than 27% of their daily caloric intake.

However, the problem may not be the act of snacking but what kids are munching on. The study showed that children are more likely to eat candy, chips, and crackers than fruits and vegetables. While these types of snacks can be detrimental to nutritious eating, healthful snacking can be beneficial to both children and adults.

In fact, says Melissa Davidson, MS, RD, CD, owner of Davidson Nutrition, PLLC, which provides counseling and consultation in the Seattle area, healthful snacking offers a number of benefits: more energy, increased mental clarity, fewer cravings for junk foods, and an overall feeling of well-being. "This is because a balanced snack will help keep blood sugar in an optimal range," she says. "Every time we eat, our blood sugar goes up. As we use the energy to run, jump, think, and blink, our blood sugar starts to come down. Low blood sugar contributes to the experience of a 'brain fog,' plus low energy and a tendency toward cravings for sugary foods. But a balanced snack helps keep blood sugar from dropping too low between meals."

Healthful snacking is a great way to manage hunger and keep appetite in check, says North Carolina-based dietitian Julie Whittington, MS, RD, LDN. "I encourage consumers to never go longer than three or four hours without eating," she says. "Our bodies prefer to have smaller, more frequent meals during the day rather than fewer large meals. This includes eating in the morning. Unfortunately, many people skip breakfast and end up hungrier and eating more in the day than they would if they had actually eaten breakfast."

That's exactly what researchers from the Imperial College of London found and presented at last year's Endocrine Society annual meeting in Washington, D.C. Skipping breakfast can lead to higher-calorie cravings later, including snacking on junk foods. The researchers say their results support the long-touted idea that breakfast is the most important meal of the day.

Davidson agrees that many of her clients skip breakfast, which may lead to unhealthy snacking or eating larger meals later in the day. "A common eating pattern in the U.S. is to have minimal or no breakfast, possibly skip lunch, or just grab some vending machine junk food to get through the workday, then have a

large dinner at night, with constant snacking until bedtime," she says. "If this pattern is identified, I often encourage weaving in a balanced whole foods-based breakfast. Lunch and daytime snacks also help a client 'front load' their day with calories and nutrition. This helps them to get the nutrition they need so that they don't find themselves in a craving state by nighttime."

It's also important to recognize that eating healthful snacks throughout the day can help ensure more healthful mealtimes. If clients fill up on healthful foods during snack time, they may eat more reasonably portioned meals. "If you were to only eat three meals a day, most of us would need to consume calorie-dense meals in order to eat enough calories in a day to maintain our energy," says Davidson.

In addition to helping people stay full longer and promoting more healthful and smaller meals, snacking can also provide additional nutrients that clients may not obtain during meals, says Amy Jamieson-Petonic, RD, an American Dietetic Association spokesperson and director of wellness coaching at the Cleveland Clinic. "For example, a great way to get additional veggies in, which is always a challenge for folks, is to eat them as snacks," she says. "Fresh and frozen vegetables add additional vitamin A, C, K, folacin, potassium, and fiber to the diet. I always encourage my clients to snack on a rainbow of veggies: red, green, yellow, and orange peppers; carrots; a small spinach salad; broccoli; and cauliflower. This is also a great way to add anticancer foods to the diet."

Snacking Around the Clock

When it comes to morning, afternoon, and evening snacks, there is no evidence that certain snacks are better for certain times of day, says Davidson. What works varies with the individual. For instance, a small, healthful muffin may seem to be a more appropriate snack in the early hours of the day, while air-popped popcorn may seem to be an ideal evening snack. But clients could find the most benefit from planning snacks according to their daily schedule.

"The foods you choose need to fuel your body's ability to meet each day's activities optimally," says Davidson. "If you have more activity going on in the AM and/or a longer stretch between meals coming up, you may want a heartier snack at that time. If your next meal isn't far off, you may just need a light snack to hold you off until the meal comes."

Which healthful snacks to choose will depend largely on individual taste preferences. (See "Snack Attack" sidebar for specific examples.) "Snacks should really be based on what's right for you," adds Robin Plotkin, RD, LD, a culinary and nutrition expert. "There's no right or wrong in terms of when to eat a specific snack. If you like smooth, creamy textures, you might be a pita-bread-and-hummus kind of person, and it will taste good morning, noon, or night. If crunch appeals to you, apples and peanut butter might be your thing."

Some great morning snacks include a whole grain muffin with trans fat-free peanut butter, an apple and string cheese, and nonfat Greek yogurt with berries, suggests Jamieson-Petonic. An afternoon snack might be peppers and hummus or some veggies and dip. And after-dinner snacks might include apples with peanut butter, whole grain pretzels with mustard, and whole grain crackers with low-fat cheese. "But with all snacks, including these, the key is monitoring portion sizes," advises Jamieson-Petonic. "For example, 1 to 2 tablespoons of hummus—not the whole

container—is a serving. Clients need to remember this is a snack, and it's a way to complement a meal. It's not meant to have as many calories as an entire meal."

Dessert can even fit into a balanced diet, says Whittington, who herself confesses a love for sweet treats. "The key is portion control and frequency," she says. "Opt for the chocolate cake and pastries only on a special occasion and meet your sweet tooth more regularly with foods that provide some nutritious ingredients. If you are a person [who] has dessert every day, make it something like berries and a small piece of dark chocolate. Occasionally have things like homemade natural pudding, natural ice cream, or fruit parfaits."

Educating Clients

Snacking is an area where most clients need much guidance because it can easily get out of control or be unhealthful. Arm your clients with tips that will help them snack smart. For instance, suggest that they always portion out their snacks in advance. Instead of sitting down with an entire box of whole grain crackers, they should portion out one serving size and put it in a separate bowl. People can easily lose track of how many crackers they have eaten when they have a whole box in front of them.

In addition, recent research shows that when consumers eat an organic snack, they often underestimate the calories and eat more of it than they otherwise would have. Researchers from the Cornell Food and Brand Lab found that when people ate cookies labeled as "organic," they believed their snack contained 40% fewer calories than the same cookies that were unlabeled. It's important that clients recognize healthful snacks still have calories and portion control is still critical.

Plotkin says snacking is an area where dietitians can help teach clients how to look at ingredients and read nutrition labels. "For instance, there are plenty of great energy bars out there that have excellent nutritional profiles, such as Luna Bars," she says. "But when the patient stands in front of hundreds of bars in the store, it can be overwhelming, which can inadvertently lead to the healthier choice."

In addition, teaching clients what to avoid or limit is as much a part of healthy snack education as advising them on what to eat. Davidson recommends choosing anything high in empty calories, such as pastries, donuts, cookies, cakes, potato chips, candy, and sugary beverages (soda or dessertlike coffee drinks), less frequently, if ever. But recognize that clients may be more successful if they allow themselves the very occasional indulgence than if they try to forgo these foods altogether.

Davidson also advises clients to avoid items with ingredients they couldn't find in their own kitchen—or [their] mom's kitchen," she adds. "To quote Michael Pollan, I tell clients, 'If it came from a plant, eat it. If it was made in a plant, don't.'"

You also can advise clients to take a closer look at their television-viewing habits. "It's important to consider research that indicates children and adults reach for more nonnutritious snacks when watching TV due to the volume of junk food ads that they will see," says Davidson. "Therefore, it's a great idea to have healthy snacks planned for those times and to even consider turning off your TV during commercials."

Also consider taking a few extra steps to encourage your clients to eat more healthful snacks—for one, offer healthful snacks in the office. “Spend some administrative time or create an intern project to go to product websites and order free samples for professionals,” suggests Plotkin. “It’s a great way for you to sample these foods yourself and to offer samples to your patients.” Plotkin also says many food products offer coupons on their websites or through social media outlets. Dietitians can print these to offer to clients or even link to them through their own website or social media page.

The bottom line is that with a little bit of guidance and the right education, clients can be well on their way to more beneficial snacking.

— *Lindsey Getz is a freelance writer based in Royersford, Pa.*

Snack Attack

We asked a few dietitians which healthful snacks they suggest to their clients, both young and older. The following is a list of their ideas, some of which you might consider passing along to your clients should a snack attack strike.

Julie Whittington, MS, RD, LDN

“When seeking healthful snacks, the possibilities are endless. Ideally, snacks should be a good balance of carbohydrate, protein, and fat. This way you achieve the maximum from the snack.” Whittington suggests the following:

- Soy chips and fresh salsa (eg, corn and black bean)
- Trail mix with whole grain cereal and dried fruit and nuts
- Natural fruit and nut bars (eg, LaraBar)
- Seitan jerky (vegetarian beef jerky)
- String cheese and carrots
- Natural fruit leathers (eg, FruitaBu, Clif Kid Twisted Fruit, Stretch Island Fruit Company)
- Turkey and bell pepper roll-ups
- Greek yogurt and granola (eg, Bear Naked Fit)
- Fruit with optional nut butter or nuts

Melissa Davidson, MS, RD, CD

“A balanced snack is a natural food high in protein plus a natural food high in fiber.” Davidson recommends the following:

- Organic cheese stick plus bell pepper slices
- Tuna salad plus whole-wheat bread (1/2 sandwich)
- Freshly ground peanut butter plus apple slices
- Hummus plus carrot sticks
- 1/4 cup almonds plus a banana
- Plain organic yogurt plus fresh berries

Amy Cartwright, MS, RD, LDN

“Snacks should be filled with as many nutrients as possible. Fiber keeps us fuller longer, helps improve blood glucose control, and keeps our digestive system regular. And snacks that contain carbohydrates and protein maintain our appetite and energy longer.” Cartwright advises trying the following:

- 1 medium piece of fruit and a cheese stick
- 1 T of peanut butter and whole-wheat crackers
- 1 cup of low-fat yogurt and fruit
- Veggie sticks and low-fat dip
- 1 handful of almonds and a medium piece of fruit
- Baked tortilla chips and salsa