

[IMAGE]

Sensible Snacking

By Sarah Ceccarelli

Keeping up with a fast-paced lifestyle doesn't mean a healthy diet has to suffer. People have grown more and more comfortable eating at their desks, in their cars or on the bus in order to stay on schedule. But while eating on the go can mean schedules are maintained, it can also mean nutrition is compromised. When hunger strikes, it's easy to grab the first thing you see or the fastest food available, but this type of eating does add up. Even though time (or lack thereof!) is a constant issue for many people, it doesn't mean food has to be, too. With a little planning, a healthy diet can be maintained by consistently making smart decisions and choosing healthy snacks throughout the day. Snacking should be viewed as an opportunity to incorporate positive nutrition into your diet, and can help balance blood sugar levels, which in turn prevents cravings and overeating during the day and at mealtime.

The Benefits of Healthy Snacking

Do you think of snacking as an occasional treat? By eating smaller, more frequent portions of good-for-you snacks throughout the day, you can actually provide more opportunities to eat the important nutrients your body needs. Snacking well can help you consume the daily levels of fruit, vegetables, whole grains, fiber, protein and micronutrients recommended by USDA's MyPyramid (www.mypyramid.com). For example, if you snack on a banana between breakfast and lunch and a whole-grain granola bar later in the afternoon, you're on your way to meeting your fruit and whole-grain recommendations for the day.

Snacking can also help with portion control. By eating small amounts of food during the day, you'll be able to better listen to your body's needs and wants. Smart, controlled snacking teaches us how satisfying a small portion can be, so that when meal time comes, you can better gauge how much your body actually *needs* instead of how much your eyes *think* you want. Smaller portions of smart snacks also help maintain energy levels because your metabolism and mood are on less of a roller coaster and more able to stay balanced.

How Do I Become a Healthy Snacker?

Snacking is only beneficial if the food you are snacking on has the vital nutrients your body needs. It doesn't take much time or energy to learn how to select and find foods that are delicious and healthy snacks.

Look for a combination of foods that provide a balance of complex carbohydrates, protein, fiber and healthy fats. Try to avoid snacks high in trans fat, high-fructose corn syrup and processed sugar. Don't forget to look for the positive things such as whole grains, fiber, protein, fruits, nuts, seeds, omega-3s and other natural ingredients, which are all nutritious attributes of a good-for-you snack. Most importantly, always read labels and look for foods that are minimally processed and free of highly refined sweeteners and artificial ingredients. If you can't easily understand or pronounce the ingredient name, there's a good chance it's not natural. A great snack for the morning or afternoon is plain organic yogurt with all-natural granola. Some yogurts have probiotics that help balance your digestive tract, and some granolas are loaded with whole grains, fruits and nuts.

The next equally important tip is to always be prepared! When you are planning your day, schedule snack breaks accordingly, just as you plan exercise, meetings and meals. If you proactively plan for snacks, you'll set yourself up for success. For example, if you know you will be running from one appointment to the next, pack a whole-grain granola bar and a piece of fruit to avoid being caught without a healthy snack. This will decrease the temptation to grab something quickly that may be full of empty calories and artificial ingredients.

But What About...?

No matter how much you plan and prepare, there will be the occasional roadblock. Who hasn't left their snack on the counter, only to be greeted by it in the evening? There's no need to stress. When you know what to look for, you can find healthy solutions anywhere. Remember to read labels and look for foods that are as close to nature as possible. Most convenience stores stock sunflower seeds or almonds to tide you over between meals and keep your energy high - but make sure to portion your snacks. If you find you're frequently hungry while you're on the road, it may be a good idea to keep a bag of trail mix in your car. Choose a mix that's full of dried fruit and nuts, which can provide antioxidants, fiber and protein; or better yet, visit the bulk bins at your market and make your own!

image - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark **Make Healthy Snacking a Natural Part of Your Day**

With a mix of daily exercise and a balanced diet, healthy snacking will come naturally, instead of feeling like a conscious effort. Incorporating healthy snacks into your regimen is a good way to break up the day. Healthy snacking renews your energy, and you'll feel better for having an apple with peanut butter rather than counting the minutes until lunch.

Snacking also provides the opportunity to be creative. Go ahead - explore, experiment and have fun! Change your snacking preferences to coincide with the seasons and what's fresh at the market. Indulge in mangoes in the spring, whole-grain pumpkin muffins in the fall, oranges in the winter and frozen fruit smoothies in the summer. There are endless possibilities for healthy snacks. Most importantly, make sure your snacks contain good-for-you ingredients in order to fuel your body with the nutrients it needs to keep energy high throughout each and every day.

Here's to healthy snacking!

Whole Grains 101

Whole grains are an easy and important way to incorporate good nutrition into healthy snacks. Here's a quick snapshot of whole grains and why they need to be a part of your diet.

What are whole grains and how are they different from refined grains? Whole grains are the seeds of plants and contain three main components: the bran, the endosperm and the germ. Each part of the grain adds valuable nutrients, including (but not limited to) the following: fiber, B vitamins, protein, carbohydrates, vitamin E, magnesium, phosphorus, iron and zinc. Refined grains leave out most of the positive natural nutrition.

What are the benefits of whole grains and why should I include them in my diet? Whole grains provide complex carbohydrates, protein, fiber, vitamins, and minerals, and can reduce the risk of coronary heart disease, help with weight maintenance and lower risk for other chronic diseases. To help achieve optimal health, choose a variety of whole grains such as buckwheat, oats, barley, triticale, rye, long-grain brown rice and hard, red winter wheat.

- **Buckwheat** is hearty in flavor and a good source of fiber. Buckwheat is great for replacing white rice in your favorite recipes.
- **Oats** are prized for their cholesterol-lowering soluble fiber.
- **Barley** is also a great source of soluble fiber and gives a nutty flavor.
- **Triticale** is a cross between durum wheat and rye, with higher protein content than its parents.
- **Rye** is a staple grain that is usually chosen for its distinct flavor when combined with other whole grains.
- **Long-Grain Brown Rice** has five times the fiber of white rice.

- **Hard, Red Winter Wheat** is a hardy winter crop and is naturally higher in protein than its spring wheat counterpart.

How can I tell if I am choosing products containing whole grains? First, check the ingredient list and look for the word "whole" before each grain listing. Remember that ingredients are listed in descending order by weight, so the closer the ingredient is to the beginning of the list, the more the food contains per serving.

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