Healthy Snacking: The Fuel that Moves You

Everybody snacks, but sometimes it’s hard to differentiate between a snack and a meal. Meals should be planned and eaten at regular times every day. A snack is a temporary solution to give your body nutrients it can use to produce energy in between those regularly scheduled meals. The key to healthy snacking is choosing nutrient-dense foods that are low in total calories when you go longer than 4-5 hours between meals. This gives your body the fuel it needs without consuming as many calories as a normal meal.

What’s Going on in the Body?
After a meal your body has a spike in blood sugar (glucose), a product of digestion. This must be either used as fuel or stored. Your body produces a chemical called insulin that triggers the storage of glucose into the muscle and liver cells. When the body runs low on blood glucose, it accesses the glucose stored by insulin and uses it as fuel. Hunger is triggered when the glucose in the blood reaches low levels and stored glucose cannot be accessed fast enough. The body releases a hormone ghrelin, which triggers the urge to eat!

Glucose is the primary fuel source for your body, especially for your brain and muscles. Not eating for 4-5 hours results in lower glucose levels and will affect you mentally, physically, and emotionally.

How you feel when you’re hungry:

- Mentally
  - Difficulty concentrating
  - Confusion
- Physically
  - Shaky hands
  - Rapid heart rate
  - Fainting
- Emotionally
  - Anxiety
  - Irritability

Nutrient-Rich Snacks To-Go

- Mixed Nuts or Trail Mix
- Carrots and Celery Sticks with Hummus
- Banana and Peanut Butter
- Mixed Berries with Greek Yogurt
- Cottage Cheese with Fruit
- Granola Bar
- Whole Wheat Crackers or Pita Chips

Snack Smart
The most common mistake people have is over-consuming calories when snacking. Remember, a snack is not a meal! Snack in a way that alleviates the negative symptoms of hunger and allows your body to get the optimal nutrition for restoring blood glucose levels. Smart snacking acts as a temporary solution for your body’s blood glucose levels until your next meal. Choose nutrient-rich foods to help fill the gaps between your normal eating times.

Here are some tips for snacking smart:

- Timing is Everything
  - Eat at the same general times every day. This allows your body to get on a schedule so it knows when you need to eat. Irregular eating leads can lead to extreme hunger and increased stress on your body.
  - TRY THIS: Set alarms on your phone or plan a day ahead for when you will be eating meals. Try to space out meals around 3-5 hours apart.
Know Your Macronutrients

- Carbs (4 calories/gram): Carbs are the primary source of fuel for the body and will be utilized first. Great for before or after a work-out or when in need of a quick boost of energy.
  - Examples: fresh fruit, whole wheat crackers/bread, non-fat Greek yogurt or granola
- Fats (9 calories/gram): Our body only needs a small amount of fat when snacking. Fats are a concentrated source of energy that can help you feel full.
  - Examples: nuts/nut butter, seeds, turkey jerky, hummus
- Protein (4 calories/gram): Proteins are broken down when carbs are not available. They also help to preserve lean muscle and repair tissue.
  - Examples: nuts, milk, eggs

Healthy Does Not Mean Pricey

- People often assume that choosing healthy foods means spending more dollars, but this isn’t necessarily the case.
- You can buy a greater quantity of healthy food that has many more nutrients than most unhealthy food of a similar price.
- When it is put into perspective, healthy foods are actually the better choice for you AND your wallet.

Don’t get scared off by snacking! Very often snacking haunts us with images of a couch potatoes mindlessly dipping into a bag of greasy pork rinds or boxes upon boxes of packaged foods loaded with added sugars. The reality is snacking is a part of daily life and something your body often needs to make it to the next meal feeling energized. Snack wisely by finding healthy foods that work for you!

Still struggling with snacking? MIT Recreation has a Registered Dietitian who will be happy to help you out.

Email nutrition@mit.edu to set up an appointment today!

Check out “Making Peace with Food” offered by MIT Community Wellness. The group is open to MIT students who are struggling with an unhealthy relationship with food, or who are looking for nutrition education or support. Contact: 617-253-2916

Athlete’s Corner: Eat to Compete

Pre-Game: For high-intensity activity exceeding 90 minutes, Have a meal that is high in carbs and contains a little protein 3-4 hours before an event. 500-1,000 calories is ideal for a pre-game meal. Avoid fats and keep hydrated with water.
  - Try 2 slices of bread, 2 ounces of chicken, and ½ cup of mixed berries

Post-Game: A small recovery meal is ideal within 30 minutes following a game and should be a mix of carbs and protein. This mix will help replenish glucose stores and aid in muscle recovery.
  - Try a banana and peanut butter or a glass of chocolate milk.

3“Macronutrients: the Importance of Carbohydrate, Protein, and Fat”. McKinley Health Center: University of Illinois at urbana-Champaign. 2014.
4J. Anderson, Colorado State University Extension foods and nutrition specialist and professor; L. Young, M.S., former, graduate student, food science and human nutrition; and S. Prior, former graduate intern, food science and human nutrition. 12/06. Reviewed and revised by K. Topham, graduate student, food science and human nutrition. 12/10.