

It's Snack Time

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Learn how snacks affect your overall diet and how to select healthful snacks that meet your dietary needs.

Snacks are the foods we eat outside of a more structured meal setting. A recent study reported that more than 95 percent of American women and children have at least one snack a day. Snacking can be part of a healthy eating plan or it can be a harmful habit. The difference between harmful and healthy snacking is up to you. Think about what, when, how often and how much you eat snacks.

Examine your snacking habits by answering the following questions.

Snack Quiz

1. Do your snacks fit into one of these MyPyramid food groups: (1) meat and beans (2) fruits (3) vegetables (4) grains (5) milk and milk products?
2. Do you avoid snacks within one hour before a meal?
3. Do you have a written snack plan?
4. At home do you have a bowl of fresh fruits or a container of cut vegetables available?
5. Do you snack only when you are hungry?
6. Do you brush your teeth after snacks?

Nutritional Value of Snacks

Snacks can be packed with nutrients and supply our bodies with energy. They can fill your nutritional gaps if you make the right choices. The following tips will help determine if the snacks you choose contribute to a healthful diet.

1. Select foods from the MyPyramid food groups: (1) meat and beans (2) fruits (3) vegetables (4) grains (5) milk and milk products. Snacks from these food groups contribute more nutritional value and usually fewer calories than foods that are high in sugar and fat.
2. To keep snacking under control, develop a snack plan. Include what you will eat, how much and the time you will eat a snack. If you have children, involve them in their snack plan.
3. Use snacks to supplement daily meals, not to replace them. If snacks are eaten within one hour before a meal, they may interfere with your appetite at the meal.

4. Have appropriate snack choices available for yourself and your family. Studies show snacks are often chosen because of their availability. If your cupboard is full of cookies, chips and candy, it's easy to make them your snack of choice. If fresh fruits are washed and vegetables cleaned and cut into finger foods, they become an easy choice. Many vegetables can be bought already pre-cut and cleaned.
5. Eat snacks only when you are hungry. Adults may not need snacks between meals to get through the day. It depends on the amount of physical activity, portion sizes at meals and work schedule.

Elderly adults, on the other hand, may have difficulty eating larger meals and may do well with several small snacks through the day.

Children and teens are more likely to need snacks because of their growth and the amount of time they are physically active. Also small children have less stomach capacity. They may need a healthy snack at mid-morning or mid-afternoon, especially if they have been physically active. Plan ahead for your child's snack needs so you can avoid last-minute snacking decisions.

6. Use these recommendations based on the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

Eating Healthy While Staying Within Calorie Needs

Eat a variety of nutritious snacks from all of the food groups while keeping the amount of calories you consume under control. Avoid the rut of selecting the same snack all the time. Eat snacks to meet a physical need. Avoid eating snacks out of boredom, frustration or loneliness. If that is the case, try physical activity instead.

Weight Management and Physical Activity

Find your balance between food and physical activity. Be sure to stay within your daily calorie needs. Be physically active at least 30 to 60 minutes a day on most days of the week

Food Group Favorites

Choose a variety of fruits and vegetables to help you get the full range of vitamins, minerals and fiber you need to stay healthy. Whole fresh fruits, dried fruits and packaged pre-cut vegetables are easy snacks to take with you.

Eat at least three or more ounces per day of whole grains. Whole grains provide an important source of fiber. Snack on whole grains such as popcorn, whole-oat low-fat granola bars, brown rice cakes, snack mixes made with whole-grain cereal or low-fat yogurt topped with whole-grain cereal. Consume three cups per day of fat-free or low-fat milk or milk products, which are needed for healthy bones.

Fats, Carbohydrates and Sodium

Limit sweetened beverages such as pop and fruity drinks as they add many calories and little or no nutrients to our diet. Limit snacks with saturated and *trans* fats, cholesterol and added sugars and salt. Pre-packaged snack foods such as cookies, crackers, chips, cakes and microwave popcorn have *trans* fats and added salt and sugars. Pay attention to the amounts of these ingredients on the food label. Keep your total fat intake below 35 percent of your calories and your sodium under one teaspoon (2300 mg) per day. Whole fruits and vegetables, low fat dairy products, nuts and whole grain cereals are good snack choices for limiting fat, sugar and salt intake.

Alcoholic Beverages

In general, alcoholic beverages are not a good snack item. They supply calories but very few essential nutrients. Children, adolescents and women who are or may become pregnant should not drink alcohol. Those who drive or operate machinery, cannot restrict their drinking or are taking medications that interact with alcohol should not drink alcohol. Those who choose to drink alcohol should consume no more than one drink daily if female and two if male.

Snack Choices for Young and Old

This list provides ideas to help you plan your own snacks. Not all the choices are appropriate for your situation, but they may provide a starting point for healthy snack planning. The best snack foods are those in which fat or sugar is not the largest source of calories.

[A] – Is a good source of Vitamin A

[C] – Is a good source of Vitamin C

[AC] – Is a good source of both Vitamins A and C

Fruits, Vegetables, Juices

- Apple juice
- Apple wedges or rings
- Applesauce
- Apricots, fresh [A]
- Artichokes
- Avocado slices, cubes or dip
- Banana chunks
- Broccoli [AC]
- Cabbage wedges [C]
- Carrot curls [A]
- Cauliflowerettes, raw [C]
- Celery sticks
- Celery stuffed with peanut butter
- Cherries

- Cucumber rings or sticks
- Fruit kabobs
- Fruit slushes
- Frozen fruitsicles
- Grapefruit juice [C]
- Grapefruit sections [C]
- Grapes (seedless) in small bunches
- Grape juice
- Green peas in pod
- Green or red pepper strips or squares [C]
- Kiwi
- Melons – cantaloupes, casaba, honeydew, watermelon, others (cubes or small wedges with the rind left on) [C]
- Mixed vegetable juice [AC]
- Orange juice [C]
- Orange sections or wedges [C]
- Peach pieces, fresh [C]
- Pear wedges, fresh
- Pineapple juice [C]
- Plums, fresh
- Prunes, dried or stewed
- Plumped raisins
- Strawberries [C]
- Tangerine segments [C]
- Tomato juice [AC]
- Tomatoes (little cherry tomatoes) [AC]
- Turnip sticks, raw – yellow or white
- Zucchini strips

Dairy*

- Buttermilk
- Chocolate milk
- Cocoa, hot
- Fruited milk shake or other blended milk drinks
- Skim, low fat or whole milk
- Yogurt – low fat or nonfat

**Whole milk and fortified low fat/skim milk are also good sources of Vitamin A.*

Breads, Crackers, Cereals (at least half of these should be whole-grain)

(Put together with a small cup of fruit juice or milk drink)

- Bagels
- Breadsticks
- Cereal, hot or cold, with milk
- Cinnamon toast
- Cookies – oatmeal, molasses, gingersnap
- Cornbread
- Crackers – saltines, whole wheat
- French toast
- Graham crackers
- Muffins – corn, bran, English, blueberry, oatmeal
- Scramble
- Tortilla
- Waffle

Snacks Made With Meat, Fish, Cheese, Egg, Peanut Butter, Beans

(Eat alone or with a small cup of fruit juice or milk drink)

- Low-fat cheese cubes
- Low-fat cottage cheese with diced fresh or canned fruit
- Crackers with cheese spread or peanut butter
- Mini pizza
- Eggs, hard cooked: halves, wedges
- Ham cubes and other lean meats
- Meat and cheese kabobs
- Miniature meatballs
- Sandwiches—open face or closed, cut in quarters, squares, triangles, strips, rounds
- String cheese
- Tortilla with bean dip

Especially for Adults in the Workplace

Make your snacks at work work for you. Vending machines and snack boxes at work or treats brought by co-workers can leave you with food choices that are too high in fat, sugar or salt for your own health goals. Think ahead and make your own snack packs for work by choosing foods from the above snack list and taking them along with you to your workplace.

Especially for Kids

Snacks are a regular part of the day in childcare homes, preschools and child care centers. Snacks can help supply the nutrients needed for children's optimum growth and development. Snack time serves other functions, as well. It is a time for social interaction and a time when children can learn to enjoy new foods. Exposing children to a variety of foods at early ages helps them to accept more food choices.

Snacks for Kids Checklist

- _____ Does it look good and taste good?
- _____ Does it provide vitamins and minerals?
- _____ Can it be chewed and swallowed easily?

- _____ Will there be a choking problem? (*Peanuts, hotdogs and popcorn may cause problems. See The Chokers*)
- _____ Can fingers be used to eat it? (*Kids often love to handle their own food without interference from an adult.*)
- _____ Is it different from yesterday's snack?
- _____ Is it fun to eat?

The Chokers

Do not give to children under age 2.

Hard to chew
Nougat candy
Nuts, Peanuts
Popcorn

Slippery and smooth
Hard candy
Grapes

Coin-shaped
Carrot coins
Hot dogs

Reference

United States Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Agriculture. *Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2005*. Sixth edition, Washington, D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, January 2005.

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