



Is the Snack the New Meal?

By John Mamana, M. D.

While the economy has certainly put a damper on eating out, the lifestyles of the fast and furious family continue to drive the snack trend. With less time for sit down meals, and a larger availability of snacks, most time-starved Americans, including business executives, view eating as an any time, all day activity.

The market certainly supports this trend. Research conducted by The International Deli-Dairy-Bakery Association (IDDBA) estimates that nearly 90% of Americans indulge in a snack on any given day, compared with only 75% who eat breakfast and 88% who eat lunch. Snacking and grazing allows the busy executive to continue working and multi-tasking which ultimately can help maximize leisure time.

There are some health considerations to the all day eating trend. While some proponents of snacking claim weight loss – others claim weight gain. Ultimately it boils down to the nutritional value, calorie content, and type of food you snack on, as well as when you eat.

A study conducted at Northwestern University indicates that eating at irregular times, especially during sleeping hours, affects weight gain. Because our body's internal clock also regulates energy use, the timing of meals may influence the balance between caloric intake and expenditure.

"How or why a person gains weight is very complicated, but it clearly is not just calories in and calories out," said Fred Turek, professor of neurobiology and physiology at the Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences and director of the Center for Sleep and Circadian Biology. "We think some factors are under circadian control. Better timing of meals, which would require a change in behavior, could be a critical element in slowing the ever-increasing incidence of obesity."

Yet there are dieticians who recommend eating smaller amounts of food several times throughout the day. The belief is that by eating at regular intervals, blood sugar levels - and energy - remain more stable which may help people manage their calories better because they aren't starving by mealtime and more likely to overeat.



While eating throughout the day will help maintain your energy, it can also put you at higher risk for type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and stroke, according to a recent report in the Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences.

“The increased risk results when insulin, which regulates blood sugar, spikes after eating foods that have a high glycemic index (GI), a measure of how high a food raises blood sugar”, explains lead researcher Victor Zammit, Ph.D., head of cell biochemistry at Hannah Research Institute in Ayr, Scotland. “If you eat only three meals a day (even high-glycemic ones) your insulin levels have time to even out, but if you eat high-glycemic foods between meals, your insulin levels stay dangerously high.”

Ultimately, while snacking saves time, it can hinder a healthful lifestyle. Avoid sugary snacks and drinks and stick with whole foods. Fruits, vegetables, yogurt, or whole-grain foods with lean protein or healthy fats will help keep you fuller between meals and minimize late night noshing. If you are having trouble with your weight or energy levels, see your doctor at Executive MD for advice on how to manage your food intake for better health.

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