

Snacking: How Often Is Too Often?

If you're sheltering at home because of the recent outbreak of coronavirus (COVID-19), you may find yourself tempted to reach for food more often, especially if you're stressed or worried. Even under normal circumstances, whether it's because we're crazy busy, or because snacking helps with portion and craving control, many people find themselves snacking throughout the day—rather than eating “three square meals.”

This raises the question, is this frequent snacking helpful for weight management or not?

The answer is, it depends.

Snacking pros and cons

Done right, “smart snacking” can help curb your appetite and provide nutrients your body needs. Done wrong, snacking can cause weight gain because you end up eating more calories than your body needs. Whether you're in Phase 1 or beyond, you can use your urge to snack to help with weight loss and maintenance goals. Here are some things to be mindful of with regard to snacking.

- If you have a hard time limiting yourself to small portions, eating more times per day equals more chances to overeat or binge. If eating more often means eating too much, then you shouldn't do it.
- If you feel slightly hungry, and it's been more than three hours since you last ate, a small snack may be a good choice. If you're not sure if you're hungry, wait 20 minutes and see if you still feel the need to eat.
- If you only want to snack on junk foods—that is, a healthy snack just won't do—you're probably experiencing a craving, not true hunger, and snacking could do more harm than good.

Snacking dos and don'ts

If you decide eating small meals and snacks suits your needs, here are a few dos and don'ts:

- Do choose nutritious snacks. If you're in Phase 1, fresh vegetables like sliced cucumber, broccoli, or peppers are pleasantly crunchy and filling. See your Phase 1 food sheet for a list of vegetables and seasonings to choose from. For variety, you'll also want to have on hand some of Ideal Protein's snacks, such as Nacho Cheese Dorados, Peanut Butter Bars, or Vanilla Crispy Squares.
- If you're in maintenance, you'll have more foods to choose from, such as low fat yogurt, cottage cheese, carrot sticks with hummus, an apple with a piece of cheese, or a serving of nuts. Snacks containing protein keep you feeling satisfied longer than snacks primarily consisting of carbohydrates.

- Don't snack mindlessly, while watching TV, surfing the Internet, or driving. It's far too easy to mindlessly munch through more than you need if you're not paying full attention.
- Do pay attention to hunger signals. Eat a portion-controlled, nutritious snack before you become so hungry you lose control of your eating.
- Don't eat too close to bedtime. Have your last meal or snack at least two to three hours before bed for your best night's sleep.
- Do snack for the right reasons—because you're hungry, and as part of your healthy eating plan.
- Don't use snacking as an excuse to overeat sweet or salty foods.
- Don't eat irregularly or skip meals. Eating erratically can signal your body that food is scarce and it should store calories, causing weight gain. If you're staying home from work or school right now, take this time to develop a regular meal and snack schedule.

As you can see, “smart snacking,” if done right, can be a good thing!

If you are paying attention to your body's signals, examining if/why you are hungry, are adjusting your larger meals accordingly, and are selecting nutritious options, snacking could help you on your way to weight loss, and also help you maintain hard-earned weight loss successes.

Do give our “Snacking dos and don'ts list” a try today!