Smart Snacking

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Between school, homework, sports, your after-school job, and hanging out with friends, it may feel like there's no time for healthy eating. And when you do stop to eat, it's probably tempting to go the quick and easy route by grabbing a burger and fries, potato chips, or candy.

But it is possible to treat yourself to a healthy snack. In fact, if you have a hectic schedule, it's even more important to eat healthy foods that give you the fuel you need to keep going.

Even if you take time to eat three meals a day, you may still feel hungry at times. What's the answer? Healthy snacks. Snacking on nutritious food can keep your energy level high and your mind alert without taking up a lot of your time.

Why Healthy Snacking Is Good for You

You may have noticed that you feel hungry a lot. This is natural — during adolescence, the body needs more nutrients to grow as it should. Snacks are a terrific way to satisfy that hunger and get all the vitamins and nutrients your body needs.

But you need to pay attention to what you eat. Stuffing your face with a large order of fries after class may give you a temporary boost, but a snack this high in fat and calories will only slow you down in the long run.

To keep energy levels going — and avoid weight gain — steer clear of foods with lots of added sugars like candy bars or soda. Look for foods that contain fiber like whole-grain breads, cereals, fruit, and vegetables and combine them with protein-rich snacks such as peanut butter or low-fat yogurt or cheese.

Judging Whether Snacks Are Healthy

Choosing healthy snacks means shopping smart. Be cautious of the health claims on food packages. Here are some things to watch out for:

- Just because something is "all natural" or "pure" doesn't necessarily mean that it's nutritious. For example, "all natural" juice drinks or sodas can be filled with sugar (which is, after all, a natural ingredient) but all that sugar means they'll be high in calories and give you little nutrition.

  A granola bar is a good example of a snack that seems healthy. Although granola bars can be a good source of certain vitamins and nutrients, many also contain a great deal of fat, including a particularly harmful type of fat called **trans fat**. And there can be a lot of sugar in granola cereals and bars. Check the Nutrition Facts label on the package to be sure.

- Be skeptical of low-fat food claims, too. If the fat has been eliminated or cut back, the amount of sugar in the food might have increased to keep that food tasting good. Many low-fat foods have nearly as many calories as their full-fat versions.

Whatever claims a food's manufacturer writes on the front of the package, you can judge whether a food is healthy for you by reading the ingredients and the nutrition information on the food label.

Smart Snacking Strategies

Here are some ways to make healthy snacking part of your everyday routine:

- **Prepare healthy snacks in advance.** Did you know that you can make your own granola or trail mix? When you make something yourself, you get to control the ingredients and put in what's good for you! You also can keep plenty of fresh fruit and veggies at home to take on the go. Cut up melons or vegetables like celery and carrots in advance. Keep the servings in bags in the fridge, ready to grab and go.

- **Keep healthy snacks with you.** Make it a habit to stash some fruit, whole-grain crackers, or baby carrots in your backpack or workout bag so you always have some healthy food nearby.

- **Make it interesting.** Healthy snacking doesn't have to be boring as long as you give yourself a variety of choices. Whole-wheat pretzels with spicy mustard, rice cakes with peanut butter and raisins, or low-fat fruit yogurt are healthy, tasty, and easy.

- **Satisfy cravings with healthier approaches.** If you're crazy for chocolate, try a hot chocolate drink instead of a chocolate bar. An 8-ounce mug of hot chocolate has only 140 calories and 3 grams of fat. The average chocolate bar, on the other hand, has 230 calories and 13 grams of fat. Substitute nonfat frozen yogurt or sorbet for ice cream. If you're craving savory munchies, snack on baked tortilla chips instead of regular corn chips and pair them with salsa instead of sour cream. Or satisfy salt cravings with pretzels instead of chips.

- **Read serving size information.** What looks like a small package of cookies can contain 2 or more servings — which means double or even triple the amounts of fat, calories, and sugar shown on the label.

Don't slip up after dinner. Evenings can be a tempting time to indulge in sugary, fatty snacks. If you're really feeling hungry, don't ignore it. Instead, pick the right snacks to fill the hunger gap. Whole-wheat fig bars, rice cakes, or air-popped popcorn can do the trick, as can fruit paired with cheese or yogurt.

Treats to Try

Here are a few healthy snacking ideas:

- **Ants on a log:** Spread peanut butter on celery sticks and top with raisins.

- **Banana ice:** Peel several very ripe bananas, break them into 1-inch pieces, and freeze the pieces in a sealed plastic bag. Just before serving, whirl the pieces in the blender with a small amount of water or juice. Serve right away. Add berries for a different flavor or top with fruit or nuts.

- **Healthy ice pops:** Freeze fresh, unsweetened 100% juice in ice pop molds or ice cube trays.

- **Whole-grain pita and hummus:** Warm a pita in the oven on low, then cut it into small triangles. Dip it in a tasty, low-fat hummus. Hummus is available in yummy flavors like garlic and spicy red pepper. Hummus also makes a tasty dip for cut–up veggies.

- **Happy trails mix:** Combine 1 cup whole-grain toasted oat cereal with ¼ cup chopped walnuts and ¼ cup dried cranberries for a healthy trail mix.

As with everything, moderation is the key to smart snacking. People who eat regular meals and healthy snacks are less likely to overeat and gain weight than people who skip meals or go for long periods without eating and then scarf down a large order of fries.

It's natural to feel hungrier at certain times — like between a long afternoon of classes and your swim meet. Knowing how much food your body needs to satisfy this hunger is critical. A handful of walnuts is great brain food before sitting down to do that math homework. But a whole bag won't help you add anything — except pounds!

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