It’s Snack Time

If chosen wisely, these mini-meals can add a variety of nutrients to your diet.

June 3, 2019 By Gerrie E. Summers

According to the American Heart Association, snacking isn’t bad as long as people do it in moderation and people make healthy choices. Snacks can be tasty as well as nutritious, so there’s no need to feel guilty about crunching and munching between main meals.

“I don’t think the term ‘snack food’ has to mean that they are unhealthy,” says Amy Lacey, author of Cali’flour Kitchen: 125 Cauliflower-Based Recipes for the Carbs You Crave and cofounder and CEO of Cali’flour Foods. “I think there is a major educational opportunity here to teach people that you can stay full and feed your cravings in a healthy way.”

In fact, snacking can be a smart thing to do. For example, eating between meals boosts your energy and reduces the likelihood that you’ll overeat at mealtimes.

But before you gleefully grab a treat, remember that you must be careful about which foods you choose, especially when it comes to those conveniently packaged products manufacturers label as “healthy.” Some foods marketed as being beneficial to you, such as granola and protein bars, may be full of sugar and other ingredients that make them high in calories and may be harmful to your body. Fortunately, however, snack foods that are tasty and good for you are trending in a big way.

“It’s amazing how there is an evolution taking place that demands alternatives to the candy bars and fast food hamburgers,” says Mary Kosir, CEO and cofounder of WholeMe, manufacturers of grain-free, whole-food snacks. “I actually find bags of nuts, bottles of water, cut-up fruit and Greek yogurt readily available in airports and convenience stores.”

Still, be sure that you’re actually hungry. Sometimes we turn to junk foods out of boredom, fatigue or stress—not real hunger. Before reaching for anything, try taking a leisurely 10- to 15-minute walk. If that doesn’t work or a walk isn’t feasible, think hard about what foods you decide to put into your mouth.

In addition, take time to eat your snack—just as you would (or should) during a main meal—and avoid doing so while working or watching TV. Such mindless eating can contribute to overeating.

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If you are on a strict diet or are not eating the right foods during regular meals, hunger pangs may drive you to make poor choices. Therefore, think of snacks as nutrient-rich, single-serving mini-meals.

Also realize that you don't have to eat a lot to stay satiated between meals. In general, choose foods with protein, especially those made from plant-based protein as they help to keep you feeling full.

Some great choices in this category are nuts or nut butters—preferably unsalted and without sugar. These foods contain fiber, which helps to improve cardiovascular health, and vitamin E, which protects cells and boosts the immune system.

Another good pick is chickpeas, which are high in protein, fiber, iron, vitamin B and magnesium. (Try these legumes dried or roasted, or puree them to make hummus to use as a dip with crunchy raw carrots, zucchini or bell pepper sticks.)

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Other selections include canned tuna, which contains omega-3 fatty acids that protect against cardiovascular disease. (Just don't consume this fish too frequently, as it contains mercury.) Boiled eggs (choose free-range ones, and, yes, eat the yolk) are a good source of vitamin D. Calcium-rich Greek yogurt supports bone health and contains vitamin B-12, which is good for blood cells and nerves. Seeds, such as pumpkin and sunflower, boast protein, beneficial oils, minerals and vitamins.

For those times when you're unable to plan ahead, reach for healthy and convenient prepackaged snacks that are low in salt, sugar and saturated and trans fats. What's more, you don't have to sacrifice favorite snacks or flavor when choosing a clean, or whole-food, substitute. "For example, you can still have dips as a snack!" says Lacey. "But instead of dipping corn chips, use our cauliflower crackers."

Cauliflower, in particular, has become a popular ingredient for making low-calorie, low-carb substitutes for foods such as rice, pizza crusts and mashed potatoes.

"Cauliflower is such a versatile vegetable. It's healthy for you, and it really takes on the flavor that is being added to it," Lacey continues. "It makes sense that people would want to turn it into all of their favorite snacks to have a low-carb alternative. We tried so many vegetables, including broccoli and zucchini, before figuring out cauliflower was the best one for pizza crust. We quickly learned that we could easily change things up, experiment with other flavors and create other healthy snack options."

Lacey, who is living with lupus, a chronic autoimmune disease that triggers inflammation, began her food journey as a way to find help for her condition. "I was on a mission to find non-inflammatory alternatives to all of my favorite foods," she says.

To help her husband manage his type 1 diabetes and sugar intake, as well as change to a clean eating plan for her family, Kosir says she became a scientist at home. “I experimented with using nut flours as a substitute for regular white flour and replacing cane sugar with honey and unsweetened coconut as well as using more natural extracts, like vanilla and almond,” she says. “What I found was a powerful, clean alternative to some of the sugary snacks I used to eat!”

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Kosir’s secret to creating tasty meals is to reach for condiments. “I always think that foods need to be well seasoned, so adding spice, natural extracts and texture to foods usually does an amazing job packing dishes with powerful flavor so we don’t feel like we are giving anything up,” she says.

“But this does require some thought and meal prep, so setting aside a bit of time for this is always critical,” she advises. “My tips for better snacking include buying cut-up fruits and vegetables, which saves lots of time. I also make my own trail mix with nuts, bits of chocolate and real coconut and scour the local co-ops to look for new brands that make healthy eating easier.”

Lacey finds the foods she loves and learns to eat them in a healthier way. “Dieting doesn’t work when you’re expected to go cold turkey on your favorite items,” she says. “For example, I love chips and salsa or guacamole. Both salsa and guacamole are good for you. So instead of using corn chips, use our cauliflower crackers as a low-carb alternative that still gives you a good crunch! I love eating cheeseburgers too, so now I make a cheeseburger-style pizza on one of our crusts. I love nachos and Buffalo chicken, so we’ve created healthy recipes for these as well.”

Both women agree that preparation is key. Lacey fixes healthy snacks and makes them portable. She dices veggies and puts them, and other healthy foods, into containers that she can grab and go. This renders obsolete those visits to vending machines—which are usually conveniently near cash registers—and grocery stores for snacks when hunger strikes.

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But hunger pangs don’t just occur during the day. Cravings can strike at night and may interfere with getting quality sleep when your stomach starts to rumble. But even then, some late-night snacks can help you get to sleep without totally ruining your diet.

One solution, experts suggest, is to eat half of a turkey sandwich on whole wheat bread. (The tryptophan in turkey makes you sleepy, and whole grains digest more slowly.)

Also ponder the following options:

- Spread a nut butter, such as peanut, cashew or almond butter, on whole wheat toast. (Nut butter raises serotonin levels to help you relax and get to sleep.)
- Choose (It has whole grain and fiber).

- Reach for a banana. (The fruit contains some tryptophan and magnesium.)
- Grab a handful of almonds. (Nuts have magnesium and tryptophan, which can improve serotonin levels and balance blood sugar levels to help you wind down and sleep.)
- Spoon plain Greek yogurt into a bowl. (Add cherries or pomegranate seeds, which contain melatonin.)
- Finally, tangy hummus, which is made from chickpeas, has tryptophan and folate, which can help regulate sleep, and vitamin B6, which can help regulate the body's circadian rhythm—the internal clock that controls when we go to sleep and awaken.

Healthy Habits

Snacking can be a good thing!

Eating between meals can be part of a healthy eating plan, says John Gilmer, PhD, vice president of research and development for Active Iron, makers of an iron supplement. But folks should observe the following rules:

- Have a snack about two hours before a main meal. "It won't impact your dinner plans but will sustain you so that you don't overeat later," Gilmer says.
- Practice strategic snacking. "It's also OK to add a snack to your day if you know that you will not be able to have a meal when your body is typically expecting one," Gilmer suggests. For example, if you have a morning meeting that might overlap with lunchtime, eat something healthy beforehand.
- Snack only when you are hungry; not because it's in your routine. "Don't eat because it's what you always do," Gilmer advises.
- Before workouts. "Having something to eat an hour before you exercise can help to ensure that you don't lose all your energy during your workout," Gilmer suggests. Additionally, a healthy snack after being active can also prevent you from overeating later and replenish the energy stores your body needs to function well.
- Reach for portable snacks. Try a handful of mixed nuts, cheese or low-fat yogurt (with fresh fruit mixed in), veggies, heart-healthy hummus, grapes, berries, bananas, whole grain crackers or pretzels, and smoothies with yogurt and fruit.

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