



NEWS RELEASE

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To Snack or Not to Snack

That is the question. Does snacking between meals lead to good health or to overweight? This issue has been debated for many years. Some researchers have found an association between eating snacks and obesity. By contrast, another group of researchers found that eating meals more frequently was associated with lower weight in men, but not in women. Still other researchers have also suggested that larger but fewer meals increases the risk of obesity, heart disease, and diabetes. Let's take a closer look.

One study took the same amount of food and compared people who were fed 3 meals a day to people who were fed 9 and 17 times a day. The more the food was eaten in smaller amounts throughout the day, the better the blood cholesterol was (lower total cholesterol and lower LDL or "bad" cholesterol). However in the real world, if eating frequently leads to putting on more pounds, this would increase a person's risk for heart disease. The trick here is to eat the amount of food that does not increase your weight, but spread it out over the day.

Another potential advantage in eating smaller, more frequent meals is that stomach capacity is likely to shrink. A study that examined the stomach capacity of people on a very-low-calorie diet for 4 weeks showed that it was reduced by 27 to 36% compared to control subjects who maintained their usual eating habits. This study suggests that people who regularly eat smaller, more frequent meals will begin to feel more satisfied with less food over time.

When is snacking harmful? Another study fed people a high calorie lunch then fed them a 400-calorie snack before they were hungry again. They were interested to see if the big lunch followed by the snack would decrease the amount of food people ate at dinner. It did not. Not only did people eat the same amount they normally do at dinner, eating lots of food ahead of time did not delay the time they ate dinner. So eating snacks when you are not hungry can lead to eating too much food and becoming overweight.

A healthy breakfast such as oatmeal with fresh fruit and nonfat milk is the one meal each day that people should be encouraged to eat even when they not hungry. Eating breakfast may impact snacking behavior in overweight people. Many overweight people skip breakfast. However, a study that randomly assigned overweight people to various weight-loss programs showed that those who consumed breakfast lost significantly more weight over a 12-week program. This may be because those who skip breakfast tend to select more calorie-rich foods later in the day than those who regularly eat breakfast.

So what do you do? The best advice at this time is to focus on what you eat (e.g. choosing more whole grains, beans, fruits, vegetables, versus processed foods that are high in calories) and to eat only when hungry (after you eat breakfast). In the long term, this is likely to prove more beneficial than focusing on how much you are eating (counting calories).

Referenced from: Catherine Lamp, UCCE Tulare County; Source: Based on an article "To Snack or Not to Snack, That is the Question" http://www.foodandhealth.com/cpecourses/snack.shtml#_Toc477601279