

Put the Brakes on Nighttime Overeating

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For many, nighttime is the right time to overeat

When is the absolute worst time to overeat, metabolically speaking? Many experts agree that it's nighttime, when our bodies have the lowest need for calories.

Yet "in America, we eat more during dinner than any other meal," says U.S. Department of Agriculture researcher Shanthy Bowman, PhD.

This is especially true for those of us who are overweight, according to a recent national USDA survey. It found that overweight adults tended to eat significantly more calories than normal-weight adults at dinnertime (while eating just a few more calories at breakfast and lunch).

Dinner isn't the only problem, either. While afternoon is the most popular time to snack, evening snacks are in the No. 2 position. According to a recent study from the University of Texas at El Paso, snacking at night makes it all too easy to overeat. That's because eating late in the day may be less satisfying than eating the same amount of food earlier in the day.

"Intake in the late night lacks satiating value and can result in greater overall daily intake" of calories, says the study's lead researcher, John de Castro, PhD, chairman of the psychology department at the University of Texas at El Paso.

Facts about Evening Eating

Over the years, De Castro's research into meal sizes, meal patterns, and calorie distribution has turned up some other findings about evening eating:

- Meal size tends to increase over the day, with peaks at lunch and dinner. One study showed that participants ate 42% of their total daily calories during and after dinner.
- Our evening food intake tends to be relatively high in fat, compared to that at earlier meals.
- The longer the gap between dinner and the previous meal or snack, the larger the dinner. Interestingly, the gap between meals is a significant predictor of meal size for dinner only.



- People who eat lightly at night end up eating fewer calories and grams of fat overall than people who eat big dinners and nighttime snacks. According to the results of one study, people who had a light snack at night ate 9.3% fewer total calories and 10% less fat overall than those who ate larger nighttime snacks.

Obesity expert Edward Saltzman, MD, thinks the real problem is not so much that we burn fewer calories at night, but that nighttime eating tends to result from unhealthy meal patterns. The three types of meal-pattern problems Saltzman sees most often are:

- People don't eat during the day and then become ravenous and overeat at night. "If people wonder why they aren't hungry in the morning, it could be because they ate too much the night before," explains Saltzman, an energy metabolism scientist with the Jean Mayer USDA Human Nutrition Research Center on Aging at Tufts University.
- Food is used for all sorts of emotional reasons at the end of a workday (as a relaxant, as entertainment, as a distraction, etc.)
- Eating becomes associated with sedentary behavior, like watching television. In other words, we get into a pattern of eating while we watch TV or use a computer -- activities many of us tend to do in the evening.

Tips for Overcoming Nighttime Noshing

But even with all this working against us, experts say, it is possible to avoid nighttime overeating. If you're a nighttime nosher, here are some tips to help you kick the habit:

1. Get in the habit of enjoying a hot cup of decaffeinated tea at night. Tea comes in so many great flavors that you'll never be bored. In the warmer months, have a glass of iced tea instead.
2. Many people snack at night because they're bored. Keep your evenings interesting, and you'll find it easier to refrain from mindless snacking. Take a night class, plan an evening exercise session, find a new and interesting book or hobby, etc.
3. If you've gotten into the habit of eating in front of the television, vow to eat only in the kitchen and only drink no-calorie beverages while watching TV. Or limit your TV eating to fruits and vegetables. Occupy your hands in other ways -- ride a stationary bike, do exercises with an exercise ball, take up knitting, pay bills, or write notes to friends.
4. Because evening meals and snacks tend to be the highest in fat, it's especially important to make healthy food choices at this time. Go for foods that are rich in nutrients, high in fiber, and balanced with some lean protein and a little bit of "better" fat (like olive or canola oil, avocado, or nuts).
5. Though you don't want to eat too many calories at dinner, for some people, a small dinner could lead to a late-night snacking tailspin. Eat a balanced, high-fiber dinner. If



you get hungry later, enjoy a smart and satisfying evening snack like low-fat yogurt with a sprinkle of whole-grain cereal, fruit with a few slices of cheese, or whole-grain cereal with milk.

6. Have a balanced, higher-fiber lunch and afternoon snack to help avoid overeating at dinner.

7. Don't skip breakfast. "When people skip breakfast, they end up eating more calories by the end of the day, and we know that they end up compensating for this skipped meal with high-sugar, high-fat foods," explains Bowman.

8. People who eat small, frequent meals tend to eat fewer total calories and fat grams than those who eat larger meals less often. Try eating small, frequent meals to see if it improves the way you eat and feel.

9. If you're in the habit of finishing your day with dessert, try having a mini-portion. The first few bites of a food always taste the best, anyway. Experts say a petite portion is more likely to satisfy if you choose a dessert you truly enjoy, take your time and savor every bite, and accompany your treat with a cup of hot coffee or tea.

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