

# Snacks

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It's 5 o'clock and dinner won't be ready for another hour. But you're hungry now. A bag of chips sits on the counter. There's nothing in the refrigerator but a few wilted carrot sticks and limp stalks of celery. Temptation strikes.

The real problem with snacking is not when you snack or even if you snack -- but what you choose to eat. Whether you buy your snacks ready-made or make them at home, the trick is to steer clear of excess fats and sugar. To do that, surround yourself with plenty of good-tasting foods rich in complex carbohydrates and fiber. Create an illusion of fat and calories by combining creamy and crunchy or chewy textures. And use a little imagination.

How to turn a potential liability into an asset

The U.S. Department of Agriculture reports that 75 percent of women snack. Yet even routine snacking is not all bad. In fact, frequent mini-meals can be good for you. Here's how:

■ Binge control -- If eating a bagel at 3 o'clock in the afternoon keeps you from eating second or third helpings at dinner, you may actually save calories. A 160-calorie bagel hardly compares to the 500 or so extra calories you may be tempted to devour because you're so hungry.

■ Satisfaction for small appetites -- Young children's tiny stomachs can hold only small portions of food at one time.

Older adults who are less active and who burn fewer calories may also feel more comfortable eating smaller, more frequent meals.

■ Extra energy and nutrients -- Traditional meals often lose out to busy schedules. A grab-and-go meal is often the difference between some nourishment and none at all.

Snacks rich in complex carbohydrates and fiber will give you immediate energy that has some staying power. A small amount of low-fat protein adds more sustained energy.

Snacks to pick and fix:

Good-for-you snacks start with a proper pantry. Stock your refrigerator and shelves with

foods that are fast -- not fussy. These ideas for healthful snacks keep fat and calories at bay by maximizing whole grains and fresh fruits and vegetables. Best of all, you can make them all in 10 minutes or less.

■ Toast one-half whole-wheat English muffin. Top with Canadian bacon, tomato slice, low-fat American cheese. Microwave until cheese melts.

■ Mash one-half banana into peanut butter and spread on a whole-grain bagel.

■ Mix cold leftover chicken (or convenience-type chunk chicken), seedless green grapes, sunflower seeds, plain yogurt and a dash of curry powder. Stuff into a hollowed-out green pepper or whole-wheat pita pocket.

■ Spread one-half cinnamon-raisin bagel with part-skim ricotta cheese. Top with apple slices.

■ Layer soft mini corn or flour tortillas with shredded low-fat cheddar or Monterey Jack cheese. Microwave until cheese melts. Slice into bite-size pie shapes.

■ Spread a brown rice cake with farmer cheese (similar to cottage cheese, but drier and firmer) and fresh strawberries or low-sugar spreadable fruit.

■ Top a baked potato with plain yogurt and Cajun seasoning.

■ Spread raisin toast with apple butter.

■ Spread a slice of whole-grain crisp bread (wafer-thin cracker) with fruit-flavored low-fat yogurt.

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