

GET YOUR SNACKS ON TRACK

Americans have a love affair with snacking: 78 percent of us snack daily. **"The number of times we eat each day is far and away the largest cause of increased calorie intake,"** says Barry Popkin, Ph.D., a professor of nutrition at the University of North Carolina School of Public Health. About 400-plus calories a day come from between-meal nibbling. All those extra calories add up and can be a major diet derailer—particularly if they're not the healthiest choices. Done right, though, snacks can improve your diet quality and weight. Here's how. *By Sally Kuzemchak, M.S., R.D.*

BE CHOOSY

The average snack has 226 calories—which means two a day could inflate your week by nearly 3,200 calories (almost a pound of weight gain). To control calories, choose a snack with a natural "physical boundary," says Yale's David Katz, M.D., such as a small yogurt or a banana. Or pour a measured amount into a bowl. And be extra mindful if you're drinking snacks like smoothies. "We don't compensate for calories in the liquid form like we do for food because they don't fill us up," warns *EatingWell* advisor Rachel Johnson, Ph.D., R.D.

SCHEDULE SNACKS

Snacks are everywhere—the hardware store, the office, even the gym. To avoid grazing all day, make a plan for when you're going to snack. Every 3 to 4 hours is a good guide: going longer can trigger a low-

blood-sugar response: hunger pangs, fatigue, even irritability. For most people, a late-afternoon snack makes sense. "A snack between lunch and dinner can subdue the appetite so you can make better choices and eat less at dinner," says Katz. Post-dinner snacking is trickier. Research shows there's a peak wave of cravings at 8 p.m. for salty, sweet and starchy foods. That nighttime noshing may alter hunger hormones and promote fat storage, leading to weight gain and higher "bad" cholesterol. If you're a night owl, choose a small, healthy bite (a sliced pear or bowl of sugar-snap peas) to thwart a cupboard cleanout.

INCLUDE PROTEIN

Protein has a unique ability to satisfy us on fewer calories and keep hunger at bay longer. In a study from Cornell, a

snack of cheese and vegetables helped quell the appetites of children more so than chips—and, as a result, the kids felt full with 72 percent fewer calories. The same was found for grown-ups too. Nuts are also a good high-protein snack, especially since researchers say a portion of the calories from almonds, peanuts and pistachios isn't absorbed by the body. Take a cue from the research: pair nuts or cheese with a veggie to fill you up on fewer calories.

KEEP IT SIMPLE

A snack that's a whole food (a hard-boiled egg or carrots) keeps calories and portions reasonable. But if you're reaching for something packaged, a short list of ingredients you can recognize and pronounce is a good litmus test. That's because lengthy lists tend to include flavor enhancers and added sweeteners that stimulate your appetite instead of satisfying it. Watch out for savory snacks that contain sugar, such as nuts coated in both sweet and salty flavors. These combos may cause you to eat more.