

That muffin top won't look as good on you.



## Nibble Nation

Grazing used to be considered a healthy eating strategy, but research shows that munching your way through the day might hit you where it hurts: the scale.

By Leslie Goldman



➔ There was a point in the not-so-distant past when gas stations sold gas, not soft pretzels. Gyms had water fountains, not vending machines, and food trucks were parked at carnivals, not around every corner. Today, roughly a quarter of the calories in the American diet come from snacks, according to a study published in *The Journal of Nutrition*. And that figure has jumped 41 percent in the past 20 years.

“Everyone is constantly eating, especially foods that are convenient to buy and hold,” says Phil Lempert, a food-industry analyst in Santa Monica, California. And you guessed it: Those convenient foods often tend to be the ones most laden with fat, sugar, and sodium. Snacks in general have more calories than ever before. No wonder the obesity rate among American adults has shot from 15 percent to 34 percent over the past 30 years. But aside from being insanely accessible, why do these between-meal bites have such power? We found out.

### Snack Psychology

Sure, we eat snacks because they taste good, but we're also motivated by our ideas about what they are—and what they supposedly can do for us.

#### ➤ We think they're healthy.

Around the turn of the millennium, research began to bear out the benefits of eating



more frequently (as opposed to sticking to three main meals). The theory is that regularly stoking your metabolism with food can actually help you burn more calories. As a result, nutritionists began advocating an eating plan that distributed the total daily calories (around 1,800 for a 130-pound woman) among five or six “mini meals” eaten three to four hours apart. It’s good advice—if you follow it. Unfortunately, too many people simply added two or three smaller meals (at 250 to 300 calories each) to their usual 400- to 500-calorie breakfasts, lunches, and dinners. You get the picture: They ended up overeating, all in the name of better health.

**> The hype is hard to resist.**

Take the “health halo” effect, for example. By simply labeling foods with healthy-sounding names, manufacturers and restaurants can get you to

eat more, regardless of how nutritious (or not) the snack may be. Earlier this year, a study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* found that people, particularly those with a history of dieting, tended to consume more when a food had a description such as “fruit chews” than when the identical nosh was called “candy chews.” And snack-size packaging—which supposedly was introduced to help us *manage* our eating—may only make matters worse. A different study in the *JCR* found that dieters inhaled significantly more calories from mini packs of cookies than from standard-size ones. When you finish one bag and still aren’t satisfied (the portions are really small, after all), you dig in to another—and then another, says lead study author Maura L. Scott, Ph.D.

**> They give us a rush.** “Like doing the laundry or going to work, eating meals is often seen as routine and obligatory,”

says *WH* advisor Susan Albers, Psy.D., author of *But I Deserve This Chocolate!* “Snacks, in contrast, feel like a gold star for a job well done.” Plus, because they tend to be sugary, fatty, or salty, they trigger the release of dopamine, a neurotransmitter that elicits feelings of euphoria, much like the feel-good rush of a triumphant shopping trip or a roll in the hay. Even the best salad, like it or not, won’t inspire that kind of biological reaction.

**How to Snack Smarter**

The secret is simple: You have to rethink what a snack is—or isn’t, says *WH* weight-loss columnist Keri Glassman, R.D., author of *The Snack Factor Diet*. It isn’t dessert, for example. A snack doesn’t have to be sweet, chocolate-dipped, or more than 150 calories. “It can be real food, like a packet of oatmeal with 10 walnut halves sprinkled on top,” says Glassman. And

the experience can still be indulgent if you focus on taking a break and recharging your body. More ways to make your treat go further:

• **Cut it in half.** A 2010 *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* study found that people who were given the same snack, either whole or cut into halves, consumed half as much when eating the latter, possibly because they considered only the number of items (not the size of the items) they ate.

• **Plate it.** Albers has a few tricks she uses to avoid mindless munching: No eating from a serving bowl, out of a big bag, or while standing at the kitchen counter. “Everything I eat goes onto a dish, which helps me keep portion control in mind,” she says.

• **Chew more.** Besides helping you feel full, chewy foods may brighten your mood too. A 2009 study in *Physiology & Behavior* suggests that the act of chewing can decrease the level of stress hormones in the body. The mechanism may be physiological (chewing can increase blood flow) or psychological (either chomping diverts our attention from stress or we simply associate it with mealtimes, when we tend to be relaxed).

• **Make your own snack packs.** Dole out small portions of your favorite snacks into plastic ziplock bags. Scott believes that homemade servings don’t trigger the same overeating as store-bought packs because the size of the food isn’t deceptively smaller—only the amount you’re allowing yourself to eat is limited, preferably to a portion that satisfies you. ■



**MUNCH METER**  
Some eats can be downed with near abandon; others need to be reined in. Try these snack suggestions from Keri Glassman, R.D.



**ALL YOU CAN EAT (REALLY!)**

No need to limit these filling, low-cal treats:

- > Air-popped popcorn
- > Raw veggies such as jicama, sugar snap peas, and cherry tomatoes
- > Steamed artichoke (dip in a warm mixture of nonfat Greek yogurt and Dijon mustard)
- > Fresh berries
- > Cucumber slices marinated in rice vinegar and topped with chopped red onions

**TAKE IT SLOW**

Enjoy these healthy snacks; just don’t go hog wild:

- > One hard-boiled egg dusted with sea salt and black pepper (70 calories)
- > A one-ounce chunk of Parmesan (110 calories)
- > Three slices of turkey breast wrapped in lettuce, with a little mustard (70 calories)

> A quarter cup of raisins or other dried fruit (123 calories)

**PROCEED WITH CAUTION**

Portion control is key with these nutritious but high-cal eats:

- > Half an avocado with lemon and sea salt (160 calories)
- > About 15 nuts or one tablespoon of all-natural nut butter (100 calories)
- > Two tablespoons of hummus (50 calories)

**Have a Snack Attack!**

> Get tips on staying slim and satisfied at [WomensHealthMag.com/Snacks](http://WomensHealthMag.com/Snacks).