



Seize the Snack!

We all know breakfast, lunch, and dinner are important, but what about snacks? Market and scientific research around snacking continue to be popular, and for good reason, because snacking continues to be on the rise in the US. The vast majority of us eat a snack once or more throughout the day. In fact, researchers have found that since the 1970s, we are consuming more calories from snacks *and* eating more frequently. Because snacks are contributing to overall calorie intake and are being consumed more frequently, it is important to make healthy choices and be mindful of the decisions we make when snacking.

To Snack, or not To Snack?

With National Snack Food Month upon us, it's a good time to consider our snacking habits. Snacks come in all sorts whether salty or sweet, cold or warm, crispy or chewy. Whether your choice is cheese, fruit, or chips, you probably do not think of snacking as a controversial topic; however, there are some conflicting opinions! Some snack-skeptics argue that snacking makes it easy to eat too many calories throughout the day, or that it is better for the digestive system to have longer breaks between eating sessions. On the other hand, many argue that healthy snacks help keep blood sugar steady, and can prevent us from over-eating during meals.

So far, the research is inconclusive, so your best bet is to choose healthy options when you snack, and to be mindful of your body's signals. People snack for different reasons—it may be to reduce hunger, satisfy a craving, indulge in a treat, alleviate boredom, or deal with stress. Be mindful of these different reasons to help you make the right choices for your body.

Consider What, When, and How

When thinking about your snacking habits, consider what you are snacking on, when you are snacking, and how you are snacking.

What

What foods do you most often choose when selecting a snack? Are they packaged and processed, or are they whole and nourishing? If you are a frequent snacker, choose whole, energy dense foods most of the time, and save the less nutritious and processed foods for special occasions. Nutritious options include small portions of cheeses, whole-wheat crackers, fruits- whole or dried, nuts, seeds, veggies, whole grain granola bars, nut butters, and yogurts with little to no added sugar. Eat balanced snacks most of the time. For example, try to include protein with carbohydrates to help keep blood sugar levels steady and keep you full longer. Think cheese with crackers or peanut butter with an apple. If you have a hard time including enough vegetables into your diet, make snack time the time to include more! Choose carrots dipped in hummus, a smoothie with added greens, or tomatoes and mozzarella balls tossed with balsamic. When choosing packaged/processed foods, read labels. Aim for those that have low or no added sugar, are low in sodium (<140 g per serving) and have little to no saturated fat.

When

When are you snacking? Do you grab a snack when you are hungry in between meals? Do you snack when you are stressed out but not hungry? Or, maybe you find yourself snacking because there is free food, even though you just ate a full meal. Be mindful of how you feel and what your body is telling you. Pay close attention to your hunger signals and listen to them. It's best to snack in between meals when you feel slightly hungry to tide you over until the next meal. However, avoid snacking too frequently that you begin to graze and are not hungry for a full nutritious and satisfying meal.

How

How we are snacking is just as important as what and when we are snacking. What are you doing when you are snacking? Are you in front of a TV? Are you sitting down? Are you paying attention to what you are putting in your mouth? Do you know how much you just ate and how much more you really want/need? Be mindful of the situation while snacking. Snacking in the car, in front of the TV, and while being rushed around the house can cause us to eat mindlessly and overeat. In addition, when not paying attention, we can miss out on the enjoyment and taste of the foods. Avoid eating out of the bag or package that the food came in. Portion your snack out into a bowl or separate container to help you keep track of how much you are really consuming. Savor your snacks!

Snacking can be a great way to have a more balanced diet if making wise choices about what, when, and how you snack. So, next time you reach for your snack, stop to think about how you feel and what you are deciding to eat.

More Snack, Less Waste

Snack foods literally come in all shapes and sizes. Stashing a pre-packaged food bar can be an easy way to keep snacks on hand, yet the expense of a daily bar can add up. Plus, considering the potential nutritional cost as well as packaging waste, with a little pre-planning, reaching for a homemade snack every day during this shorter month could help form a sustainable lifestyle habit. Fruit or vegetables, nuts or seeds, or homemade food bars or muffins can all fill that hunger void, with minimal added packaging waste. Consider not only what is in the package, by reading the nutrition facts label and ingredients, but also what is the impact of the package.



Choosing to reach for fewer pre-packaged snack foods takes effort and preparation. It may involve up-front costs for suitable equipment or reusable packaging. Foods chosen for other meals of the day, like sandwiches or salads, can just as easily be made the right portion size for snacking needs. Or foods most often associated with snacking, such as dried fruits, nuts, vegetable chips, meat jerkies, and baked goods, can be made in advance at home.

Dehydrated snacks

The food market continues to be driven by consumers' desire for clarity in what is in our food, including trends for more homemade products, or those produced close to home. Interest is also growing for products made utilizing safe food preservation techniques. [Dehydrating foods](#), such as fruits, vegetables, meat jerkies, or even fruit leathers is minimally affected by the elevation of Colorado, except that the drier air may actually make the drying time go faster.

Fruit purchased at peak ripeness or those needed to be used before spoiling, can be blanched and pretreated according to type, then set to dry. Finished dried fruit are shelf-stable and easy for kids and adults to enjoy alone, with nuts, or used in a recipe.

Vegetables also dehydrate effortlessly and can be used successfully in recipes calling for fresh vegetables. Not all dehydrated vegetables result in the desired taste or texture of a typical snack food. Crispy chips made from [kale](#), beets, or zucchini can safely be made using the oven, if you don't have access to a food dehydrator.

Jerkins are made from drying strips of meat, and **leathers** are dehydrated from pureed fruit. Each can replicate the common packaged versions, with the added knowledge of what ingredients are going into the finished product.



For February, start to make simple substitutions of a pre-packaged snack with something homemade. Try replicating favorites or doing something new. Either way, take these four winter weeks to jump-start a new sustainable snacking habit.

Hyperlinked resources:

Colorado State University Extension, Colorado Farm to Table. (2017). *High Altitude Food Preservation*. Retrieved from: <http://farmtotable.colostate.edu/prepare-high-altitude.php#.Wi748UqnGUk>

Colorado State University Extension, Live Eat Play Colorado. (2017). *Microwaved Kale Chips*. Retrieved from: <http://www.liveeatplay.colostate.edu/eat/recipes/kalechips.php#.Wi8APkqnGUk>