

Snacking revisited: Done properly, it's not a bad thing

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Turns out, for most people, eating between meals may not be such a bad thing after all.

Healthy snacking is a great way for kids and adults to keep up energy levels, avoid overeating at main meals and ensure that they are consuming enough essential nutrients, according to a registered dietician in Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences.

"Nearly all children need at least one healthy snack a day," said Katherine French, a nutrition, diet and health educator with Penn State Cooperative Extension in Mercer County. Younger children may require two to three snacks per day, while older children may only need one.

"There's no hard and fast rule as to how many snacks a child needs," said French. She said the requirement varies with age, activity level and growth pattern. "It depends on how many calories and nutrients the child requires and how much they are consuming at meals."

Young children's small stomachs only can take in small portions of food at a time, often causing them to receive inadequate nutrition from just the three major meals. Snacks help provide the nutrients that may be missed during meal time.

But don't think of snacks as chips, candy or cookies, French cautioned. "Parents and caregivers need to shift their thinking of snacks to being 'mini-meals,' instead of traditional snacks."

"For the most-satisfying and nutrient-packed punch, these mini-meals should consist of at least two food groups," said French. Examples include apples with peanut butter, a string cheese stick with whole wheat crackers or vegetables with light ranch dressing for dipping. Low-fat yogurts and dips, nonfat milk puddings, hard-boiled eggs and English muffin mini-pizzas offer other snacking options.

Research shows that fruits and vegetables are lacking in children's diets; snacks are a good time to serve them. "Kids are more likely to consume fruits and vegetables that are already cut," said French. She suggested slicing fruits and [vegetables](#) and placing them in individual bags, ready for the refrigerator. "For fun, have kids help you cut cheese slices or whole wheat bread with a fun-shaped cookie cutter."

Just be sure that snacks for children under age three don't present a choking hazard, if the snacking won't be done under adult supervision. Foods that require such supervision include grapes, thickly-spread peanut butter, nuts, seeds, raisins, celery, hot dogs and similar foods.

Keep meals and snacks relegated to the kitchen table. "Allowing children to eat snacks in front of a television or computer can set them up with a bad habit -- contributing to excess calorie intake and weight gain as they get older," said French.

She advised that snacks be part of a healthy meal plan. "Avoid snacking within an hour of mealtime, and don't let children nibble constantly throughout the day. A healthy meal plan should include snacks and meals that are offered on a regular time schedule."

She also said parents should limit their kids' fruit-juice intake. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children's intake of [fruit](#) juice should be limited to about one-half cup for children aged one to six. Children seven to 18 should drink about one cup per day.

"Excess juice, especially before meals, will make children feel full by raising their blood-sugar level -- this reduces hunger and meal intake necessary to receive the nutrients their bodies need from food."

Adults can enjoy the benefits of healthy snacking, too. "Healthy [snacks](#) -- just like those we recommend for [children](#) -- also can provide nutrition that adults can lack at mealtime: calcium, vitamins and iron. Snacking also helps control overeating due to excessive hunger."

Whether young or old, said French, the key is to make wise snack choices.

For kid-friendly snack recipes, go to the Penn State College of Agricultural Sciences home page at agsci.psu.edu/ and type "Keep on Snacking" in the search bar.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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