

Keeping snack time a healthy time for children

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Kids aren't the only ones who smile when the words "snack time" are heard. We are obsessed with snacking. Aisle after aisle in the grocery store is filled with sweet, salty, savory and, yes, even healthy snacks. Do we live in an oversnacked society? Is this fixation adding to the dangerous level of childhood obesity and playing a role in the growing number of poorly nourished kids in our country?

“Despite the increase in weight of our children, there are still critical nutrient gaps,” said Gina Bucciferro, a registered dietitian and pediatric nutrition expert at Loyola University Medical Center. “Snacks can either make or break the nutritional quality of a kid’s daily intake.”

Research has shown that 88 percent of U.S children do not meet the recommended daily intake for fruit and 92 percent do not meet the same for vegetables. Though obesity is a major concern for kids with poor nutrition, there are other health risks as well. These include heart disease, depression, high blood pressure, tooth decay, anemia, osteoporosis and diabetes.

According to Bucciferro, snacks are a great way to bridge the nutritional gap. Parents need to be aware of what is being served and when it takes place to help keep snack time a good time.

When to snack:

After physical activity. In addition to needing high-quality energy for growth and development, children involved in sports and other physical activities need to replace the extra energy they are burning. Whole grains, fruits, vegetables and low-fat dairy products can provide the carbohydrates needed to replenish little athletes without added sugar and fat. Fluids also are important in making sure active kids stay hydrated. According to the American Dietetic Association, school-age children need to drink six 8 ounce cups of water per day and another 8 ounces for every half-hour of strenuous activity. A sports drink is only necessary for activities lasting longer than 60 minutes.

Scheduled between meal times. Children do have increased nutritional needs, so providing snacks between meals can help keep them stay focused and healthy. The goal should be to offer as much nutrition as possible without providing excessive sugar, fat and calories. Fruits, vegetables and low-fat dairy products are an easy way to meet this goal. These types of foods, eaten two to three hours before a meal will not spoil an appetite, whereas high-fat foods might.

When not to snack:

As a reward. Our relationship with food is formed at a very young age. When food is provided as a reward, an unhealthy relationship with food can be formed. Rewarding [children](#) with playtime or fun, educational activities can form much better habits than indulging in high-fat, high-sugar fare. Also, providing these types of foods after an accomplishment can lead the child to place a higher value on low-nutrition food items. Also, don't treat these foods as forbidden. Encourage everything in moderation.

To cure boredom. Starting a habit of eating when bored can become a slippery slope. If you notice your child requesting [snacks](#) at odd times, make sure to assess the situation. If your child's normal meal times have

been thrown off due to a hectic schedule or if they have had more exercise, provide them with a small, low-calorie snack such as fruit and low-fat yogurt or veggies and light ranch dip. However, if it's been a typical day and you notice your child is just antsy, provide a fun activity instead. Depending on your child's age, coloring and other activity books can be a good option for minimal supervision while not encouraging increased television time.

“Snack time can be beneficial for kids. Just make sure kids are snacking at the right time and that snack items are closing the nutrient gaps, not worsening a child's nutrient deficit, which be detrimental to a child's health,” Bucciferro said.

Provided by Loyola University Health System

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