Snacking associated with increased calories, decreased nutrients

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Snacks are providing about one-third (32 percent for women and 31 percent for men) of all daily calories, based on ARS national "What We Eat in America" survey analysis. Credit: Peggy Greb

Snacking is a dietary behavior that has increased in recent decades in the United States, while percentages of the population who are overweight and obese also have increased. Now, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) researchers with the Food Surveys Research Group (FSRG) in Beltsville, Md., have examined dietary intake survey data from more than 5,000 adults aged 20 years and older to focus on snacking habits, which are associated with increased caloric intake and decreased nutrient intake.

The survey group is part of the Agricultural Research Service (ARS) Beltsville Human Nutrition Research Center in Beltsville, Md. ARS is USDA's principal intramural scientific research agency.

The ARS national "What We Eat in America" computerized dietary survey interview is conducted continuously, and data are reported in 2-year groupings. The snacking analysis indicates that snacks provide about one-third (32 percent for women and 31 percent for men) of all daily calories from "empty calories," which are calories from solid fats and added sugars (food components that provide little nutritional value). Caloric sweeteners added to foods during processing are referred to as "added sugars."

The average intake of empty calories for men aged 20 and older surveyed was 923 calories per day. So men, on average, are consuming two to three times their limit in the solid fats and added sugars category. For women aged 20 and older, the average intake of empty calories was 624 calories per day. So women, on average, are consuming almost two to four times their limit in that category.

There is a positive side to snacking, according to FSRG nutritionist Rhonda Sebastian, who headed up the analysis of snacking patterns. Snacks provide just over one-third of the total daily fruit intake for both men and women, which is already low in the American diet.

The 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans encourage reducing intake of calories from solid fats and added sugars, and there is a limit based on an individual's overall calorie needs. To find your limit, go to www.ChooseMyPlate.gov. From there, click on "Supertracker and other tools" to create a profile and get your personalized nutrition and physical activity plan.

More information: Read more about the ARS national program for

human nutrition monitoring in a 3-part series featured in the March 2012 issue of *Agricultural Research* magazine.

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