

How to Survive a Snack Attack

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It's 3:00pm and the cravings and munchies hit. The thought of Cheetos, Corn Nuts, or something sweet dominates every thought as you rush to the closest vending machine. Cravings and snacking happen. How you handle them can make a huge difference in your health. Choosing balanced snacks will keep you feeling fuller longer and can prevent over-indulging by the time you finally sit down for dinner.

First, skip the soda – both regular and diet. One of the biggest contributors to the national weight problem is that we drink too many calories. Liquid calories don't register as real calories in our brains. Americans drink an average of 200 calories a day that can pack on 21 extra pounds in a year. Sodas are the biggest source of high-fructose corn syrup and artificial sweeteners that trick your brain into craving more food even when you're full.

When you drink a regular soda, your body gets 8 teaspoons of sugar that dramatically spikes your blood sugar. Your body tries to convert the sugar into fuel but with so much sugar being released into your bloodstream, you have more fuel than you need and the excess gets converted into fat. Just taking the step to cut down on soda and other sweetened beverages like juices (many of which contain as little as 20 percent real juice and can have up to 40 grams of sugar), can be the fastest, easiest way to lose weight and improve your health. Pay closer attention to drink labels too, particularly juices and choose those that say "100 percent fruit juice." If you really crave a sweet drink, limit yourself to one glass of fruit juice a day - and even better, dilute the juice with seltzer or sparkling water.

So here's a plug for water to ward off a snack attack since dehydration often mimics hunger. Research has shown that drinking 8-10 cups of water every day can even help you lose weight – up to 26 pounds. And, if water sounds too boring, add slices of lemons, limes, or oranges (not Kool-Aid!). Keep a pitcher of water in the fridge and a glass or water bottle on your desk so you can refill it regularly throughout the day. When that next mid-day craving hits, try drinking a glass of water first, wait about 10-15 minutes, and see if you still want that snack.

Next, think fiber and protein for your snack choices. This combo will keep you satisfied longer. When you have fiber in your stomach, blood-sugar levels stay steady so you will have more consistent energy and less hunger between meals. Fiber is found in beans, whole grains like wheat bran and oat bran, whole fresh fruits, green leafy vegetables, and root vegetables like carrots.

Here are some healthy alternatives with fiber to relieve hunger without adding on extra pounds:

- Whole grain crackers with peanut butter.
- String cheese or one ounce of other types of cheese has protein and calcium. When combined with whole wheat crackers, you get the fiber. (One ounce looks like two, 9-volt batteries.)
- A *handful* of nuts – Walnuts are high in anti-oxidants and almonds are loaded with calcium.
- Pumpkin or sunflower seeds – sunflower seeds are packed with vitamin E, fiber, protein, calcium, and iron.
- Celery or carrots with low-fat dip or cream cheese.
- Fruit with a protein – cheese, seeds, or nuts. A banana with peanut butter can be especially gratifying.
- Dark chocolate (not milk chocolate) is actually loaded with heart-protective anti-oxidants that can help reduce the risk of stroke and heart disease. Eat just one-quarter ounce and look for those made with at least 70 percent cocoa. Combine with a few nuts for some legitimate satisfaction!
- Yogurt – sounds healthy, but watch the sugar content since it varies. Greek yogurt is thick and creamy and generally has less sugar. Get the plain variety and add your fruit of choice.

And, if you can't live without a salty crispy fix, there are healthy alternatives there too. Choose baked potato chips over regular fried varieties. Whole grain pretzels are a healthier choice since they are lower in calories and fat free. Low-fat buttered popcorn is a better replacement for potato chips or other unhealthy food and is a good source of fiber. Soy crisps are also low in calories and available in a variety of flavors. You can eat them just like regular potato chips without the guilt.

If you want a helpful reference guide on what to drink and eat and what to avoid, check out the *Eat This Not That!* series of small and informative books by David Zinczenko. Loaded with colorful photos and specific food brands and names of restaurants, it's a great resource to find alternative choices without feeling totally deprived.

Making small changes in your snack choices can have a dramatic effect on your health. So plan ahead and snack with purpose. Keep a healthy arsenal nearby so you are prepared for any future attacks!

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