

# Food Fact Sheet: Healthy snacks

## Snacking worries

Many people think snacks are unhealthy additions to their eating pattern and that snacking leads to weight gain. Research shows that this can be the case, other studies indicate that people who snack can have trimmer waistlines and many snacks can make useful contributions to your overall diet.

The key to whether snacking is good or bad for you is which snacks you choose, and how much of them you eat. If you choose carefully and plan ahead, snacks can be a healthy part of your diet.

Snacks provide energy for your activities through the day and they can provide valuable nutrients such as vitamins, minerals, protein and fibre. They may also stop you overeating at the next meal by preventing you from becoming too hungry.

On the downside, some snack foods can be a source of extra fat, sugar and salt, so choose carefully and keep portion sizes sensible.

## Focus on the food groups

Choose snacks from the four main food groups, try to vary which group throughout the week and if you are watching your weight limit your choices from the carbohydrate section:

1. Fruit and Vegetables
2. Carbohydrates - bread, rice, potatoes, pasta and other cereals
3. Protein - meat, fish, eggs and beans
4. Milk and dairy foods

This is a good way to get lots of vitamins and minerals. You could also think about any food groups you may not be eating enough of, and try to add some in as snacks.

## Fruit and vegetables

Many of these foods are perfectly packaged for snacking, at home or on the go and will help you reach the recommended target of 5-a-day, for example bananas, satsumas, apples or grapes. If you have a bit more time, you could try:

- carrot, cucumber or celery sticks with cottage cheese or hummus
- chopped melon or pineapple (tinned or fresh)
- frozen grapes or frozen pineapple slices

## Carbohydrates - bread, rice, potatoes, pasta and other cereals

These foods fuel our body throughout the day. They are low in fat, and contain even more fibre and minerals if you choose wholegrain types.

Try these easy snack suggestions:

- plain or fruit scone
- small bowl of wholegrain cereal with semiskimmed milk
- a half sandwich or slice of toast with sliced banana and a little honey or thinly spread nut butter
- small bag of rice cakes, or two large ones
- half a bagel with low-fat cheese spread
- small bag of plain or lightly salted popcorn
- a hot-cross bun or slice of malt loaf

## Protein - meat, fish, eggs and beans

Most of us eat enough of these foods at meals to meet our needs, but there are also some good options for snacks. And because foods from this group are high in protein, they may also help to keep us fuller. Here are a few ideas:

- a small handful of nuts
- a boiled egg
- a tablespoon of nut and seed mix on top of low-fat yoghurt
- hummus (look for lower-fat versions) with carrot, cucumber and celery sticks
- slices of apple spread with nut butter

## Milk and dairy

Many of us don't get enough calcium in our diet. Snacking on these calcium rich foods can help you to reach your recommended two to three servings of dairy foods each day:

- low-fat yoghurt or fromage frais (preferably unsweetened)
- low-calorie hot chocolate made with semiskimmed milk
- cottage cheese and plain crackers
- fruit smoothie made with semi-skimmed milk

## What about crisps, chocolates and sweets?

The fifth food group is made up of foods that are high in fat and sugar and includes foods such as crisps, biscuits, chocolate and sweets. It's fine to have a small amount of these foods occasionally; the important thing is to get the overall balance right.

If you can't resist, try smaller portions like small bags of crisps, or fun-sized chocolate bars/bags of sweets and save them for an occasional treat. If you are unsure whether a snack you are choosing is an everyday or an occasional food, check out the food label and follow the 'snack attack' strategies below.

## Check the label

It can be difficult to know how healthy or unhealthy a food is just by looking at it. Luckily most packaged foods have a nutrition label that helps you decide. Remember, values are usually given per 100 grams (g) but may also be given per portion or per pack. You may choose to eat a different amount to the portion listed on the pack, so use the values below per 100g to make a wise decision.

The best choices have a lower content of fat, sugar and salt. You can choose these items as everyday snacks. Look for these values:

- fat content 3g or less per 100g
- sugar content 5g or less per 100g
- salt content 0.3g or less per 100g

Foods with these higher values should be occasional choices:

- fat content is more than 17.5g per 100g
- sugar content is more than 22.5g per 100g
- salt content is more than 1.5g per 100g

## 'Snack attack' strategies

Often it's not just a matter of knowing what choices are better choices – If you're really hungry and there are no healthy snacks around, it's very easy to eat something unhealthy instead. Make nutritious snacking easier with the following strategies:

**At work** – keep healthy snacks at your desk or in the office refrigerator. Bring a bag of fresh fruit to work each week or keep a stash of rice crackers in the desk drawer.

**On the go** – if you're going to be out and about, take a healthy snack in your bag. An apple, rice cakes or a small bag of nuts or raisins are very portable.

**In the shops** – try to avoid buying less nutritious snacks such as crisps and biscuits, so you don't have them tempting you while at home.

**At home** – have a bowl of fruit on display on the kitchen counter and reduced-fat and sugar yogurts in the front of the fridge and cut up sticks of vegetables, so you notice the healthy options. Keep less healthy treats out of sight.

## More tips

Try to snack because you're hungry, because it's a long time between meals, or because you're planning an exercise session – not just because the food is there.

Try having a drink first – we often mistake hunger for being thirsty, so have a large glass of water and if you are still hungry after ten minutes, then have a snack as well.

It can be easiest to start by focusing on just one 'danger' time of the day, say mid-afternoon or evening snacks and try one of these strategies out!

## Summary

Are your snacks a positive and nutritious part of your eating pattern, or are they adding unnecessary fat, sugar and salt? If there's an unhealthy snack you usually reach for, try not to buy it or keep it out of sight. Put something more nutritious where you can see it and you'll be more likely to enjoy that instead. With just a little forward planning, it's easy to make your snacks a healthy and valuable part of your diet.