

**Be a Smart Snacker!**  
**Look for these grab-and-go choices**  
**From the Vending Machine**  
***A Balanced Diet is Important for a Healthy Body***  
***AND a Healthy Brain!***  
**By Lori Valencic, MEd, RD, LD**

**How to Be a Smart Snacker**

Snacks are great and it is important to snack smart. Snacks keep you going until your next meal; they're a break from your work or play, and they help prevent overeating. In addition, snacks put flexibility in your day because you get energy when your body needs it, not just when the clock says it's time to eat. Research shows healthy snacking can aid in lowering cholesterol levels and in maintaining your weight. Eating four or five small feedings a day is more beneficial than three meals for many people.

How do you get started? Listen to your body. Eat when you are hungry. Stop when you are satisfied. Make snacks easy and interesting. Eat smaller amounts at mealtime. Save part of a meal, especially when eating out, to eat as a snack later.

Be prepared for your hunger. Have food available so you can eat when you are hungry. Stash wholesome snacks at your desk, in the car, in the pantry and in your backpack or briefcase. Stop by the vending machine before you are ravenous. Here are some smart snack choices.

- Pretzels are a great low-calorie treat when you get the munchies.
- Choose granola bars that are low in sugar and provide fiber with some protein. They are handy and easy to eat on the run.
- Crunch on a bag of popcorn, a whole grain and wonderful snack food. Choose popcorn made without trans fats (hydrogenated vegetable oils).
- Munch an apple. It is a "grab-and-go" food. You'll feel full for several hours due to its pectin and fiber content. (Pectin and fiber aid in lowering cholesterol.)
- Baby carrot sticks and a cheese stick are fun finger foods. Cheese provides protein offering staying power. Carrots are loaded with fiber and antioxidants.
- My chocolate cravings are satisfied with a package of peanut M&Ms or a few Hershey's kisses. It's perfectly natural to like sweets. Most kids love sweets (and adults do, too). It's unrealistic to give up sweet treats if you really enjoy them. Like anything else, eat them on occasion and in moderation.
- For a quick and easy snack, choose cereal and milk. Choose low-sugar, whole-grain cereals like Cheerios or oatmeal. Cereals are fortified with folic acid, iron and other important vitamins and minerals.

- Select finger foods like baby carrots. Enjoy them one by one. Pre-packaged and ready-to-eat fruit and veggies are great any time. They satisfy the munchies and your sweet tooth.
- Treat yourself to a variety of dried fruit –dried cranberries, prunes, apricots and raisins.
- Choose a package of nuts –peanuts, pecans, walnuts, pistachios or other nuts. Nuts are rich in protein and unsaturated fat. They provide vitamin E, a powerful antioxidant that is cancer protective and heart healthy.
- Trail mix combined with nuts, seeds and dried fruit is satisfying, great tasting and provides fiber and protein. Choose those low in trans fats.
- For a snack that is high in calcium, protein and vitamins and is filling and great tasting, reach for a carton of yogurt.
- If you have the munchies and desire something sweet, animal crackers, fig bars or graham crackers are low-fat choices. Along with a glass of milk, cookies always hit the spot.
- Don't misinterpret thirst for hunger. Always keep a water bottle handy. And after a game of soccer, football, baseball, track, etc., nothing is more refreshing than a glass of cold water.

## **A few other Smart Snacking facts...**

### **Kids who eat breakfast perform better on achievement tests.**

Studies show kids who eat breakfast have higher achievement scores and increased concentration on tests and in the classroom than kids who skip breakfast.

### **Eating well helps mental health as well as nourishing your body.**

A varied diet with fruits, vegetables, whole grain foods (like 100% whole wheat breads and whole grain cereals like Cheerios), adequate protein, and less fat and sugar, plays an important part in keeping you healthy and alert. The healthier the body, the stronger the immune system to ward off illnesses (like the common cold and flu) and mental health conditions like anxiety and depression.

### **Cereals, breads and pastas help boost memory.**

The B vitamins in these foods are “brain-boosting” nutrients that are essential for maintaining mental function. Your body uses B vitamins to convert food into mental energy and to manufacture and repair brain tissue. Enriched grain products including whole grain cereals (such as Cheerios, raisin bran, oatmeal), breads (such as 100% whole wheat bread) and enriched pastas are top choices for B vitamins. Lean ground beef, chicken and turkey are other good sources of B vitamins.

## **Chocolate:** *Sinfully Delicious?*

The Aztecs believed that chocolate was a gift from the gods of wisdom and knowledge. It is probably the most well-liked flavor in the world. But does chocolate have any place in a healthy diet? The good news is, the answer is “yes.”

Sure, chocolate—which is approximately half sugar and half fat—gets a lot of bad press. Indulge and you feel guilty. But if eaten in moderation, there’s nothing wrong with chocolate.

Chocolate contains a complex combination of over 500 chemicals, including theobromine, a mood stimulant that provides that “feel good” bliss. The sugar and caffeine can give you a quick boost when you don’t have time for a real meal.

Just keep in mind, chocolate is calorie-dense, meaning it packs a lot of calories into a small volume. That’s why it’s important to go easy—one or two Hershey’s kisses, a chocolate chip cookie or a cup of hot chocolate. The trick to enjoying chocolate in moderation is to not chow it down in one bite. Savor the chocolate experience—enjoy its rich aroma, delight as it melts in your mouth. As long as you keep your chocolate habit in check—and maintain a balanced and varied diet of snacks and meals, there’s no reason to feel guilty.