Five or six meals a day vs. three? [1]

Alice,

What are the advantages of eating five or six smaller meals per day, as opposed to three meals per day? I've heard it helps to lose body fat. Also, are there advantages to eating more of your calories early in the day?

?Grazer

Answer

Dear Grazer,

Many of the articles on "nutrition" in the general media suggest the "right" times to eat and the number of meals to eat to prevent weight gain. It is common to hear that eating late at night causes excess fat to be produced. This is not accurate? it is overeating at any time, not simply eating at night, that causes someone to gain weight, particularly if they're not exercising or expending enough energy during the day. These articles also sometimes suggest that manipulating the number of meals per day could increase your metabolism and help you lose weight. Realistically, there is no magic number of times you should eat, nor are there specific types of foods you should eat or a particular time of day to eat to lose weight.

The bottom line is: eat when you're hungry and avoid overeating. The number of meals you have per day and when should depend upon your schedule and the total number of calories you want to take in. If you lead a typical student lifestyle, three meals a day may not work best for you. A classic example: let's say you grab a bagel at about 7 A.M. You may not have lunch until 2 P.M. and dinner until 8 P.M. This is a long time between meals. Chances are that you would be very hungry before both lunch and dinner. Being overly hungry, or "starving!" as some might say, could easily lead you to overeat at both meals. Many of us not only overeat when we are too hungry, but we also end up eating too fast, which is bad for our digestion. For this reason, several small meals may help you control portion size overall.
Carrying healthy snacks with you during the day is a great way to avoid overeating at meals. Take a bag of carrot sticks, pieces of fruit, nuts and raisins, half a sandwich, or a granola bar with you during your next long day on campus. You'll find that when you don't deny yourself food when you're hungry, you'll be much more in control of eating the amounts that are right for you. Remember, a healthy diet includes moderation, variety, and some tasty foods, too. Columbia students who want more help with meal planning can make an appointment with a nutritionist by calling x4-2284 or through Open Communicator [2].

You can certainly experiment with the number and timing of your meals to see what keeps you satisfied and energized. If you enjoy having several smaller meals, there is no reason to eat three "square" meals each day, as long as you are getting a balanced mix of fruits, vegies, whole grains, and lean protein. Likewise, if eating three meals a day is working well for you, there's no need to buy into the fad of several small meals. Wishing you enjoyment in your eating,

Alice!

Category: Healthy Eating [3]

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