

NUTRITION DIVA'S

# SECRETS FOR A HEALTHY DIET

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ALSO BY MONICA REINAGEL

*The Inflammation-Free Diet Plan*



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NUTRITION DIVA'S  
SECRETS FOR  
A HEALTHY DIET

WHAT TO EAT,  
WHAT TO AVOID,  
AND WHAT TO STOP  
WORRYING ABOUT!

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*St. Martin's Griffin*  
*New York*



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## CHAPTER SIX

# *Snacking Well*

**JUST A COUPLE** of generations ago, snacking between meals was considered to be an unhealthy habit. In some cultures, this is still the case. The French, for example, rarely eat between meals. They do not keep energy bars in their desk drawers. They don't sit in front of the TV with a bag of chips. And they certainly don't stroll around Le Bon Marché clutching a giant, greasy pretzel. They may be onto something. Despite the rich cuisine for which they are so famous, obesity rates in France are one-third that of what they are in the United States.

## **SNACKING IS OPTIONAL**

Here in the United States, it's gotten to the point that we now eat pretty much constantly—in the car, at our desks, at the movies, and while we shop. I've even seen people eat during their workouts at the gym! Snacking has become so institutionalized that most “nutritious” meal plans now include three meals and at least two snacks. In fact, many people now view snacking as a nutritional necessity.

Countless diet gurus and personal trainers insist that you must eat every two to three hours to keep your metabolism revved up. However, just because you've read or heard this a few thousand times doesn't make it true. Not only will your metabolism not slow down if you go more than three hours without food, but there may actually be some benefits to going longer between meals.



## LET'S TAKE A CLOSER LOOK

### ***Metabolism Myths and Mix-ups***

The popular notion that eating every few hours will keep your metabolism revved up is based on a couple of different misunderstandings about how metabolism works. The first has to do with the so-called starvation mode.

If you go too long without eating, your body adjusts its metabolism to conserve energy and burn fewer calories, just in case the food shortage continues. Going into “starvation mode” is a survival strategy. During a famine you'd need to live on your stored fat and down-regulating your metabolism is a way to make those fat stores go a bit farther. It's similar to the way your laptop adjusts its energy usage when it's running on batteries, such as by making the screen a little dimmer. When food is plentiful again, your metabolism goes back to normal, just the way your screen gets brighter when you plug your laptop back in.

If there actually were a famine, you'd be glad that your body is designed this way. But if you're trying to maintain your weight or lose a few pounds, the last thing you want is increased fuel efficiency. You want to be burning through stored fat like an Escalade burns through a tank of gas. And supposedly, if you reassure your body that there is no shortage of food by eating every few hours, it will oblige you by continuing to burn calories with reckless metabolic abandon.

The argument makes sense, except for one small thing. Your body doesn't go into starvation mode if you go three hours without food. It takes about three days of fasting or serious caloric restriction for your body to respond with any sort of metabolic adjustment.

The other misunderstanding has to do with the *thermic effect of*

food. This is a term that scientists use to describe the energy that your body expends digesting your food. Think of it as a sort of transaction tax that your body charges you to convert the energy in your food into a form of energy that your cells can use. If a meal contains 300 calories worth of food energy, converting that food energy into cellular energy might use up 30 calories or so. So you'd end up with just 270 calories worth of energy when it's all over. It's a little like changing money in a foreign country. When you convert money into a different currency, you have to pay the money-changer a fee.

Some people have mistakenly interpreted this to mean that if your body is constantly in the process of digesting food, it will constantly be burning calories (due to the thermic effect of food) and that if you go too long between meals, you will be missing out on this calorie-burning opportunity. Some even go so far as to claim that you can burn more calories simply by eating more often.

This is simply a misunderstanding of how the thermic effect of food works. Just like at the money changer, the fee to exchange food energy into body energy is simply a percentage of how much you're changing. It doesn't matter whether you exchange all your money in one lump sum at the beginning of your trip or change small amounts of money three times a day. The fees will be based on how much money you convert. And the thermic effect of food is based on how much you eat, not when you eat it. Rest assured that going four—or even twelve—hours between meals will have virtually no effect on your metabolism.

## What about Blood Sugar?

You'll also hear people say that eating small, frequent meals helps to keep your blood sugar levels steady. And it does: It keeps your blood sugar steadily *high*. Whoever said that your blood sugar levels were supposed to remain constant throughout the day, anyway? Blood-sugar levels naturally rise after meals, as food is digested and converted into glucose, and then fall back to baseline as the glucose is taken up by the cells and used for energy or stored for future use.

Having your blood-sugar level return to baseline is not bad for you! In fact, having your blood sugar closer to baseline for more of the day helps to protect you from developing diabetes. Now, of course, it is possible for blood sugar to get too low, which is known as hypoglycemia. A lot of people self-diagnose themselves with this condition, but very few of them actually have it. Diabetics using insulin or people with a medical condition called reactive hypoglycemia need to be careful about letting their blood sugar get too low.

But for the vast majority of us, managing blood-sugar levels is about avoiding the peaks, not the valleys. If you experience headaches, fatigue, and other discomfort whenever you go more than two or three hours without eating, the problem is probably not that your blood sugar has gotten too low, but that it's *been too high*. Eating a lot of sweets, sweetened beverages, white bread, and other refined carbohydrates will cause your blood sugar to go up very high, very quickly. What goes up, must come down and the higher the spike, the more uncomfortable the plunge. The easiest way to make that feeling go away is to eat again. But if you eat more of the same kinds of foods, you're simply getting back on the same roller coaster—and putting yourself on a fast track to type 2 diabetes.

To get off this roller coaster, eat foods that contain less sugar and more fiber, protein, and fat, such as whole grains, nuts, fruits, and vegetables. Your blood-sugar levels will rise more slowly and gradually, making the decline far less dramatic. And you may find that you don't need to eat every three hours in order to feel well.

#### THE QUICK AND DIRTY SECRET



Foods that contain protein, fiber, and fat, such as whole grains, nuts, fruits, and vegetables, help keep your blood sugar from “crashing” after meals.

## Benefits of Eating Less Frequently

In fact, going longer between meals can have some very beneficial effects on your blood sugar and other aspects of your health. It takes about three hours for your body to finish digesting a meal. If you eat every two or three hours, as everyone insists you should, your body will constantly be in what nutritionists call the “fed state.” That simply means that you are always in the process of digesting food.

If, on the other hand, you don't eat again, you'll go into something we call the “postabsorptive state” after about three hours. Several interesting things happen in the postabsorptive state, which continues for another twelve to eighteen hours if you don't eat again. First, you begin tapping into your body's stored energy reserves to run your engine. Your hormone levels adjust to shift your body out of fat-storage mode and into fat-burning mode. Hanging out in the postabsorptive state also reduces free-radical damage and inflammation, increases the production of antiaging hormones, and promotes tissue repair. And, of course, your metabolic rate remains unchanged.

### THE QUICK AND DIRTY SECRET



You don't need to worry about eating every three hours; going longer between meals is not unhealthy and can even have beneficial effects.

## Feeling Hungry Is OK

The biggest problem you are likely to experience if you go a bit longer between meals is feeling hungry, and this is not as big a problem as many of us have led ourselves to believe. When you are used to always being in the fed state, you tend to panic the minute you notice that your stomach is empty. In fact, feeling hungry is not a medical

emergency. Often, if you simply wait ten minutes, the feeling will go away. Sometimes simply having a cup of tea or a glass of water does the trick. Allowing your stomach to be empty for an hour or two is really not that uncomfortable if you let yourself get used to the sensation. It's also the perfect time to exercise. Exercising two or three hours after you eat will allow you to get the most out of your workout and, as a bonus, usually makes hunger pangs go away. Don't misunderstand what I'm saying here: I'm not advising you to stop eating or to starve yourself. But as long as you are eating the appropriate amount of food each day, it's okay to feel hungry between meals.

I'm not against snacking, per se—I'm an enthusiastic snacker myself. But contrary to what you may have been led to believe, snacking is definitely optional. And when you choose to snack, you want to be sure you're doing it well.

## HOW TO SNACK PROPERLY

Some people find that eating five or six times a day instead of the traditional three square meals works better for them. For example, you may make better dietary choices if you don't let yourself get as hungry between meals. If that helps you maintain a healthy diet, it's a valid option. Just don't let the metabolism myth (see page 143) seduce you into thinking that eating more frequently allows you to eat more. If you're gaining weight when you don't mean to (or not losing when you're trying to), it's a sign that you need to cut back on the size of your meals or the number of your snacks (or both).

### How Big Should Your Snacks Be?

The total number of calories you need to eat over the course of the day remains the same, whether you eat every five hours or every two. For most people, that's somewhere between 1,500 and 2,500 calories a day (or more if you burn a lot of calories exercising). For

example, if you were to eat three meals a day with no snacking, each meal would represent roughly a third of your daily calorie budget—somewhere between 500 and 800 calories each. If you're going to eat three meals as well as a couple of snacks, you'll need to shave off a hundred or so calories from each meal and keep your snacks fairly small. If you've embraced the six-small-meals-a-day plan, then each meal should be half-sized. See the chart below for some examples of what I mean.

### *What's the Right-size Meal and Snack?*

MEAL PLAN	SAMPLE MEAL	SAMPLE SNACK
<b><i>Three Meals, No Snacks</i></b>	bowl of minestrone soup green salad with pear, blue cheese, and walnuts whole-grain roll (about 600 calories)	None
<b><i>Three Meals, Plus Snacks</i></b>	bowl of minestrone soup green salad with blue cheese whole-grain roll (about 400 calories)	pear and walnuts (about 200 calories)
<b><i>Six Small Meals</i></b>	bowl of minestrone soup whole-grain roll (about 300 calories)	green salad with blue cheese, pear, and walnuts (about 300 calories)



#### THE QUICK AND DIRTY SECRET

The more often you eat, the smaller your meals need to be.

### What Should You Snack On?

There's no shortage of snacking possibilities. You'll find munchies in every conceivable shape, size, and flavor: salty, sweet, crunchy, chewy, or all of the above. Unapologetically decadent, reduced-guilt, or earnestly virtuous, they fill several aisles of the typical grocery

store, spilling out onto endcaps and lining the checkout lanes. Nor do you have to go to the grocery store to buy them. Every gas station, convenience store, shoe store, newsstand, video store, and pharmacy now doubles as a snack depot.

Not only are they cheap, convenient, and available everywhere you look, but snack foods are literally engineered to be irresistible. They're typically high in sugar, sodium, and fat—three chemicals that light up the pleasure centers of our brains and provoke mindless overeating. Once those neurotransmitters get humming, it's very hard to hear the more muffled hormonal signals that register fullness and signal you to stop eating. All too often, the bottom of the bag is the only thing that stops you. That's why I suggest that you buy (and eat) "snack foods" infrequently and in the smallest possible packages.

Instead, snack on real food—the same sort of foods that you'd eat at meals. Fresh fruits, raw vegetables, small portions of cheese, yogurt, or nuts all make convenient, portable snacks. And unlike "snack foods," real foods actually contribute to your nutritional well-being instead of subtracting from it.

**SNACK ON VEGETABLES**—One of the biggest challenges most people have with their diets is getting the recommended five servings of vegetables every day. Although they usually contribute only a small percentage of your daily calories, veggies are where the lion's share of the nutrients are—particularly antioxidants and other cancer-fighting, antiaging, and generally good-for-you compounds.

Snacks offer the perfect opportunity to wedge another serving or two of vegetables into your day. Rather than reaching for pretzels or chips, crunch on raw veggies instead. Baby carrots, grape tomatoes, radishes, snow peas, and sugar snap peas are convenient and portable, and don't require any cutting or peeling. Raw cauliflower florets, red peppers strips, celery sticks, cucumber rounds, or zucchini spears take just a few minutes more to prepare. Because they are so low in calories, you can eat as many raw vegetables as you like. But to make

your snack go a bit farther, add a moderate amount (a third of a cup) of a healthy dip like hummus, guacamole, or tapenade.

👉 SEE MY RECIPE FOR TOMATILLO GUACAMOLE ON PAGE 207

### *Get More Nutrition from Vegetables*

Most vegetables are fat-free but many of the most valuable nutrients in vegetables are fat-soluble vitamins. These include vitamin A, which protects your eyesight; vitamin K, which builds healthy bones and keeps your heart healthy; as well as beta carotene, lycopene, and all the carotenoids, which fight free radicals and ward off cancer.

In order to be absorbed into your cells, where they can do you some good, these nutrients need to hitch a ride on a fat molecule. Eating your spinach sauteed in a bit of olive oil and garlic or dipping your carrot sticks in peanut butter is actually much better for you than eating them plain. A study published in the *Journal of Nutrition* reported that when researchers added avocado to a salad, the subjects absorbed up to fifteen times more fat-soluble nutrients than those who ate the plain salad.

**SNACK ON FRUIT**—Fresh fruit is also a good source of fiber, antioxidants, vitamins, and minerals. But unlike vegetables, fruit is fairly high in sugar, so you don't want to overdo it. Two cups of fruit a day is a good rule of thumb. A cup is about the size of your fist. An average-size apple, orange, or banana would count as a cup. For apricots or plums, two would count as a cup. If you're the type that tends to crave sweet snacks, I suggest you use your fruit allowance to satisfy that urge. And if you're not a big fan of fruit, you can eat a couple of extra servings of vegetables instead; both food groups supply the same type of nutrients.

You'll get the most nutritional value from fresh, whole fruit—ideally whatever is local and in season. Dried fruit such as apricots, figs, and raisins are a convenient alternative. Just bear in mind that the portion sizes for dried fruit are a lot smaller. A quarter cup of

raisins or a third of a cup of dried apricots, prunes, or apple slices is equal to one cup of fresh fruit. Fruit juice is the least nutritious option. In fact, when it comes to fruit juice, less really is more. Despite its seemingly wholesome origins, most fruit juice is high in sugar and low in nutrients and fiber. The new fruit-and-vegetable juice blends are really no better. Research shows that people who drink more fruit *juice* have a higher risk of developing type 2 diabetes. Yet, eating more *whole* fruit decreases that risk.



## THE QUICK AND DIRTY SECRET

If you prefer vegetables, it's fine to substitute them for fruit. Both food groups contain the same nutrients.



## LET'S TAKE A CLOSER LOOK

***Should Fruit Always Be Eaten by Itself?***

Contrary to what you may have heard, there is no reason that you need to eat fruit separate from all other kinds of food. The notion that fruit should always be eaten by itself is a variation on the food combining myth I talked about on page 133. Like so many nutrition myths, this one has a kernel of truth. It's true that fruit passes through your stomach and into the small intestine more slowly if you eat with other foods than it does when you eat it all by itself. But it's not true that this causes the fruit to ferment in your stomach. Your stomach is far too acidic for any fermentation to occur. On the contrary, pairing fruit with a small serving (an ounce or so) of nuts or cheese is an excellent idea. Foods that contain protein and/or healthy fats help to slow down the absorption of sugar from fruit. Instead of a short-lived burst of energy that leaves you hungry an hour later, you'll get a few hours of appetite control and steady energy. See page 153 for some classic combinations.



## THE QUICK AND DIRTY SECRET

Pair fruit with a small serving of nuts or cheese to avoid a sharp rise (and fall) in blood sugar.

**SNACK ON CHEESE**—A one-ounce serving of cheese contains roughly the same amount of fat, calories, protein, and calcium as an eight-ounce serving of whole milk. Low-fat cheeses are comparable to low-fat milk. Just keep in mind that a serving of cheese is a whole lot smaller than a serving of milk, because most of the fluid has been drained off or pressed out of it. Although it provides healthy nutrients like protein and calcium, because it is high in fat, cheese can also be a concentrated source of calories. If you're trying to gain weight, cheese can be a good way to get extra calories into your diet. If you're not, keep an eye on your portion sizes.

### *What's a Serving of Cheese?*

- 1 ounce of hard cheese = size of your thumb or a compact disc (without case)
- 1 ounce of soft cheese = size of a ping-pong ball
- 1 ounce of crumbled or shredded cheese = size of a large egg
- 1 ounce of grated cheese = size of a tangerine or clementine
- 1 ounce of melted cheese = enough to fill a shot glass

**SNACK ON NUTS**—Nuts pack a whole lot of nutrition into a small package—which makes them ideal for on-the-go snacking. They're rich in antioxidants, fiber, and heart-healthy fats. They also contain nutrients called plant sterols, which help to lower LDL (or "bad") cholesterol. However, nuts are also notoriously calorie-packed. If you're not paying attention, you can easily inhale a meal's worth of calories in a couple of minutes without even realizing it. Although nuts have a lot going for them nutritionally, you still need to pay attention to

the portion size (unless you're *trying* to gain weight). A serving of nuts (approximately 100 calories) is one ounce. For larger nuts like almonds or walnuts, an ounce is about twenty nuts. For smaller nuts, like peanuts or pistachios, an ounce is around thirty nuts. Two tablespoons of nut butter counts as a serving. Pair nuts with fresh or dried fruit or enjoy them all by themselves.

## THE QUICK AND DIRTY SECRET



Nuts are a healthy snack but also a concentrated source of calories. Enjoy them in small portions—especially if weight control is a concern.

### Healthy 200-Calorie(ish) Snacks

- Slice  $\frac{1}{2}$  apple and spread with 2 tablespoons peanut butter (or other nut butter)
- Combine 4–6 dried apricots (or figs) with 20 roasted cashews (or almonds)
- Classic GORP: 2 tablespoons raisins and 2 tablespoons dry-roasted peanuts
- Dip raw vegetables in  $\frac{1}{3}$  cup hummus or Tomatillo Guacamole (recipe on page 207)
- Spread cucumber slices with  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup goat cheese spread (recipe for Goat Cheese Spread with Fig and Black Pepper on page 208)
- Toss  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup grapefruit sections with  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup cubed avocado
- Top  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup cottage cheese with  $\frac{3}{4}$  cup fresh pineapple or melon balls

### Should You Eat Energy Bars?

Although I think it's always preferable to snack on real food, there are all kinds of energy and meal replacement bars designed to offer a convenient solution to your on-the-go nutrition needs. They don't need refrigeration, preparation, or even utensils. In a pinch, they will

keep you going. But it's important to match the bar to the situation. For example, if it's three P.M. and you're sitting at your desk feeling a little groggy, it might seem like an energy bar would be the perfect solution. But unless your job involves heavy physical work, that's not really the kind of energy you're looking for. More likely, you could use a break, a walk, a stretch, some fresh air, a cup of tea or maybe even a power nap. Any of these will be more energizing than a concentrated dose of carbohydrates.

Here's a guide to the different types of bars and when to choose them:

**SPORT NUTRITION**—Energy or sport bars like Clif Bars and PowerBars are designed for athletes who need a convenient way to carry a concentrated source of calories (or *food energy*) on long workouts. They are usually high in simple carbohydrates (otherwise known as sugar) because that's the sort of fuel that can be most efficiently converted into muscle energy during exercise. They may contain some protein but they usually don't contain a whole lot of fat because it takes the body a long time to convert fat to energy. It may seem as if a product designed for athletes would be a particularly healthy choice, but unless you're involved in lengthy vigorous exercise, a concentrated dose of simple carbohydrates is the last thing you want. (See also "Nutrition and Exercise," on page 189.)



#### THE QUICK AND DIRTY SECRET

High-carbohydrate sports bars only make sense when you're engaged in heavy-duty exercise.

**MEAL REPLACEMENT**—If you're using a bar to stand in for a meal or snack, skip the sport and granola bars, which tend to be mostly carbohydrates. Instead, look for bars with a balance of protein,

carbohydrates, and fats, and a healthy dose of fiber. Because fat and protein take longer to digest, including some in your meal keeps you from getting hungry again so quickly. Fiber helps slow down the absorption of sugars and carbohydrates, which helps keeps your blood sugar and energy steadier. The Nutrition Facts label can help you gauge how balanced it is. A bar that provides 25 percent of the Daily Value for carbohydrate but only 3 percent of the Daily Value for fat or protein won't make a terribly well-balanced meal.

Although you can find bars that are higher in protein and fat, it's hard to find bars that aren't also very high in sugar. Ever notice that they don't make meal replacement bars in flavors like salmon and brown rice or broccoli and tofu? Instead, your "meal" choices are strawberry shortcake, peanut butter brownie, or chocolate caramel pretzel. Any protein or fiber the bar provides is usually all held together with the nutritional equivalent of marshmallow fluff. Wholesome-sounding ingredients like brown rice syrup, organic evaporated cane juice, grape or apple juice concentrates, and barley malt syrup are all just forms of sugar. In fact, most of these bars—even the organic, whole-grain ones—have as much sugar as the average candy bar.



#### THE QUICK AND DIRTY SECRET

Meal-replacement bars should be the option of last resort; they make a poor substitute for a healthy meal.

**LOW-CARB BARS**—You'll also find low-carb bars made with artificial sweeteners and a variety of gums, resins, and other high-tech ingredients. They contain mostly protein, fiber, and fat. (This makes them almost useless as fuel for exercise, by the way.) They can be used as a low-carb meal replacement, but these highly processed bars usually bear about as much resemblance to actual food as a paper towel resembles a tree.

**WHOLE FOOD BARS**—Finally, there are also some bars out there that are made almost entirely with whole foods like dried fruits and nuts. Then again, wouldn't it be just as convenient (and a whole lot cheaper) to keep some dried fruit and nuts around? Or, if you've got some time, why not make your own whole-food snack bars?

☛ SEE MY RECIPE FOR BEST FRUIT AND NUT BARS ON PAGE 206



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