

## Eating at Night

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Date Released : 02 Dec 2008

The old saying goes, "Breakfast for a king, lunch for a prince, dinner for pauper." But do you need to eat less at night (i.e., after 6pm)? The simple answer is no, you don't. Just make sure you don't overeat. Over consumption of carbohydrate or any food late in the day is the likely cause of weight gain related to nighttime eating.

It's hard to find any conclusive metabolic evidence that food eaten at night is more likely to be stored as body fat. Metabolism drops when you are sleeping, but that simply lowers your daily energy expenditure and its 24 hour energy balance (energy in versus energy out) that really matters for weight gain or loss. For fat loss, there appears to be no difference in success between eating three square meals or eating more often, as long as total energy intake remains the same. Studies of people who eat the same number of daily calories with different meal frequencies in metabolic chambers fail to show a difference in metabolic rate between three or six meal patterns.

The January 2005 editorial in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* (AJCN) states, "Simply put, the question of whether there is a health benefit from the consumption of small meals will ultimately depend on how much energy is consumed, as opposed to how often or how regularly one eats."

### Eat Regularly

A study in the same issue of the AJCN suggests that keeping the meal pattern constant does have metabolic advantages. Researchers compared a regular meal pattern (six meals a day) versus a "chaotic" meal pattern of anywhere between three and nine eating occasions on different days for two weeks. The regular meal pattern was associated with a greater thermic effect of food (energy cost of digestion and absorption), lower energy intake and lower fasting total and LDL ("bad") cholesterol. There was also a slightly lower postprandial (after meal) insulin concentration with the regular pattern. All these factors suggest choosing a pattern and sticking to it, rather than skipping meals, will assist with fat loss.

### Eat for Appetite Management

Eating five or six meals a day may assist with appetite management by maintaining satiety between main meals. This means you'll be less likely to overeat at meals. If you are active and have large energy requirements, you'll also need to spread your food intake over the day.

However, for some people, eating every three hours may have a negative impact on weight management. This can be the case when an individual has poor appetite management and too many snacks between meals. They may be better suited to avoiding food triggers between main meals, especially if they are not very active and don't need to fuel up so often in the day.

### Stay Under Your "Calorie Cap"

The choice of how much you eat at night can best be made based on how well you have eaten up until dinner time. If you are well below your normal calorie intake at dinner time, you can afford to be more flexible and eat more at night. If you have blown your daily calorie budget by lunch with a double cheeseburger and soft drink, you'll need to limit anything you eat later in the day to minimize excess calories and potential body fat gain.

### Getting Practical

The above evidence provides an answer that food eaten at night is not more likely to end up stored as body fat, especially when you are within your daily calorie allowance. Even so, we still need to consider the reasons why people often eat too much at night and counter these with some targeted practical advice.

*Lack of planning* - If you don't eat enough during the day, you risk greater hunger at night. If you skip breakfast, are too busy for lunch or forget to snack, you leave yourself open to overeating in the evening. By planning your food for the day and taking time out to eat regularly, you can satisfy your fuel needs and avoid overfilling late in the day.

*Eating habits* - Habits are powerful behavioral patterns that allow us to perform many of our daily tasks without conscious effort. Showering, dressing and teeth cleaning are good habits that, for most of us, happen on autopilot. Unfortunately, overeating at night also occurs on autopilot, and the habit needs to be broken. Try serving the evening meal on a smaller plate or taking leftovers off the stove and placing them in the fridge immediately. These new habits will put the brakes on dinnertime feasting.

*Social pressure* - Your diet may stay on track until you come home to sit down at the table with other people. You may feel obliged to eat everything that's served by your caring partner, mother or friend. You can also simply overeat over long social meals. To manage this feeding pressure, make your diet plans known to those at home. Recruiting their support to serve less or change what you eat at dinner will work in your favor. And as for the belief that you should clean your plate, learn a new mantra: "It's better to go in the waste than around my waist!"

*Emotional escape* - After a stressful day, food can sooth and relax. Chocolate, ice cream, cake and chips work well at delivering instant relief. Eating is also an effective short term strategy to beat nighttime boredom. Helping clients identify an evening stress or "boredom

food” link is the first step. Alternative emotional rewards or stimulation then need to be established. Ask the question, “What can you do in the evening that would reduce the need to eat?”

### **New Guidelines**

To eat less at night, focus on planning, breaking negative eating habits, social support and emotional alternatives to food. Here are two guidelines to keep in mind for your evening meal:

*Catch up on your nutrition* - The evening meal is an opportunity to achieve a balanced diet for that day. For example, if you've gone short on three serves of fruit during the day, aim to have some fruit salad for dessert. Eat a little less of your main dish if needed. If you've missed out on vegetables during the day, make your evening meal veggie based such as a stir fry, vegetable lasagne or a salad.

*Eat enough to get to bed* - Unless you are an athlete or exercising strenuously in bed, you won't need to carbo load at night. Serve a smaller portion, take the edge off hunger and then get an early night. If you are asleep, you won't feel hungry until morning. Then you can start another day of nutritious eating with a healthy breakfast fit for a king. The old saying still works but for practical reasons.

### **References:**

1. American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, Vol. 56, No. 1, 1586-1591, January 2005

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