

SNACK

FOOD

NATION

America has a **supersized** snack habit—and our waistlines are the proof. Need help?

We do it in the car, on the train, in front of the TV, on the phone, and even in bed. For too many of us, snacking has become so automatic that our brains barely register the hand-to-mouth motion. And it's not as if we're all reaching for diet-friendly apples: A 2010 study from the University of North Carolina found that most of us eat nearly 600 calories a day—roughly a third of our food—in snacks rather than meals.

Evidence of this national snack-fest is all around us. We “prefuel” and “refuel” before, during, and after workouts, taking in far more calories than we’ll ever burn on the treadmill or elliptical trainer. Kids snack in the morning at school, again when they get home, and during halftime at their soccer, lacrosse, and basketball games. Even toddlers are in on the action.

BY KAREN ANSEL, RD

Strollers come complete with compartments to hold snacks and drinks, lest the little ones go hungry for more than 5 minutes. As a result, snack foods have grown into a huge industry, totaling \$64 billion a year in sales.

As if we didn't already have enough snack opportunities, chain restaurants are beefing up their so-called snack menus, which are designed to draw in customers during off-hours. Since 2007, the number of restaurant items listed as "snacks," "snackable," or "snackers" has grown by 170%, including items such as KFC's Snacker with a crispy chicken strip, McDonald's Angus Mushroom Swiss Snack Wrap, and the Cheese and Tomato Deep Dish Pizza from the Snack Hours Menu at Uno Chicago Grill—weighing in at 290, 430, and 830 calories, respectively.

Is it any wonder our collective waistlines have ballooned in just a few generations? "In 1960, a candy bar was a treat that you saved up to buy," says Brian Wansink, PhD, a professor of applied economics and management at Cornell University and the author of *Mindless Eating*. In those days, a mere twinge of hunger was not regarded as a reason to indulge. Hunger is a natural state, just like being tired, sad, or cranky. While it's not pleasant, it's not an emergency either. Think back to when you were a child and asked your mother for a snack before dinner. She didn't treat it as if it were some kind of crisis. She simply said no, warned you against "spoiling your appetite," and told you to go outside and play.

So what happened? Beginning in the 1970s, personal income increased—while government policies lowered the price of key snack-food ingredients such as high fructose corn syrup. Manufacturers hired food scientists, who fueled the trend by learning what tastes consumers found irresistible, even addictive (namely, sugar, salt, and fat). Then they figured out how to pack those flavors into betcha-can't-eat-just-one combinations. On top of it all, business schools began to churn out a new breed of executive, the brand manager, who was trained to market products aggressively as fun, exciting, and even good for boosting your energy. "The business plan of the modern food company has been to put their foods on every street corner, making it socially acceptable to eat 24-7," says David Kessler, MD, former commissioner of the FDA and the author of *The End of Overeating* (Rodale, 2009).

The result has been a nutritional disaster. In their natural state, whole foods may be high in fat or sugar, but they're rarely high in both. Today we have man-made snack foods with a tantalizing combination of fat and sugar rolled into one. "Foods have become so 'hyperpalatable' that they're now capable of hijacking our brains the same way that nicotine and alcohol do," says Ashley Gearhardt, the lead author of a Yale University study on food addiction.

With all these forces arrayed against you, how can you resist? We at *Prevention* have identified some of women's biggest weaknesses—and surveyed the experts for help. Turn the page for our smart and healthy snacking strategies.

**YOUR
SNACK
TRAPS**

COMMON SNACK TRAPS

You're Good All Day But Pig Out At Night

You're the Jekyll and Hyde of snacking—restricting calories so much by day that by night you're ravenous. After dinner, you trek back and forth to the fridge. Before you know it, you're cuddled up on the couch with a sleeve of Oreos.

FIX IT!

Start with a breakfast that's really satisfying—like steel-cut oats, eggs, or Greek-style yogurt. Then at lunch, combine healthy carbs, protein, and fat. And truly savor your treats. Dean Ornish, MD, the author of *The Spectrum*, does a “chocolate meditation.” Take a single piece of the best chocolate you can find and let it dissolve slowly in your mouth, paying attention to the complex flavors. You'll get more pleasure with fewer calories.

You Stuff Your Face Before Dinner

You're ravenous by the time you get home from work (join the club). You inhale whatever you get your hands on, whether it's healthy or not.

FIX IT!

“Planning is key,” says Patricia Bannan, RD, the author of *Eat Right When Time Is Tight*. Before you get home, eat something light and nourishing to tide you over. If you're starving while you cook, munch on raw veggies such as sugar snap peas. Set yourself up for success by knowing meals you can cook quickly, such as frozen veggies with a rotisserie chicken and microwaveable brown rice.

You Can't Stop Eating In The Car

If you feel like you live in your car, you probably consume a lot of calories there too. Maybe you wolf down snacks straight out of the bag, with little idea of how much you've inhaled, or you pull into the nearest drive-thru for a shake.

FIX IT!

Preempt unrestrained noshing by packing portable, calorie-controlled nibbles such as small bags of cashews or an apple. Even half of a PB&J on whole wheat will do the trick. And if those fries are still calling out to you, “drive home via another route so you won't pass your favorite fast-food restaurants,” says Janna L. Fikkan, PhD, a health psychologist at Duke Integrative Medicine in Durham, NC. “It doesn't have to be the shortest way home, as long as you avoid the drive-thru.”

You Work At Home

It's just you and the fridge—and nobody watching. Because you have no meetings or structured activities, you can check the mail, toss in a load of laundry, play with the dog—and grab a snack (or two or four).

FIX IT!

Keep a log of your daily activities, including every time you get up to eat. Chances are, once you see how often you're indulging, you'll be shamed into cutting back. If you still feel the need to snack, eat at the kitchen table—and don't do anything else. Without the distraction of the computer, TV, or newspaper, you'll be much more aware of how often you eat out of habit rather than hunger.