

ASK THE NUTE GURU

THE NUTE (NUTRITION) GURU IMPARTS WISDOM ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF NATURAL, WHOLE-FOODS NUTRITION FOR MIND/BODY WELLNESS.



Hey Nute Guru, I've been trying to lose weight but my hectic schedule has made it impossible for me to watch what I eat. Is there a routine eating schedule that I can follow help me to shed those extra pounds?



At this point, you know that eating healthy, balanced meals and snacks all day, every day is clutch for losing weight. But if your eating schedule is kind of screwy, dropping pounds can still be a struggle. And that's frustrating. A recent study from Harvard University suggests that, no matter how healthy you eat, if your mealtimes don't jive with your circadian rhythms your blood sugar levels can jump 18 percent higher than normal—which can ramp up levels of the fat-storing hormone insulin. So when should you eat each meal and snack if you're trying to lose weight? We combed through the research to give you a meal-by-meal rundown of how to pencil in your eats.

Here's your plan of attack.

BREAKFAST: 6 A.M. TO 9:45 A.M.

While the research on whether eating breakfast spurs weight loss is mixed, data from the National Weight Control Registry makes a pretty strong case for the first meal of the day. According to the database, nearly 80 percent of people who have successfully lost 30 pounds or more and kept it off reported eating breakfast every single day like clockwork.

In terms of timing the all-important morning meal, a 2015 Obesity study found that consuming a high-protein breakfast between 6:00 a.m. and 9:45 a.m. was linked to a reduced risk of body fat gain and less hunger throughout the day, compared to those who waited to eat until after 10 a.m.

"I always suggest eating a healthy breakfast within one hour upon waking," says Jim White, R.D., spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. After all, the longer you put off your morning meal, the longer you go without the hunger-squashing effects of protein, fat, and fiber.

Plus, since you wake up in the morning in a fasted state, topping off your glycogen stores with healthy carbs like unsweetened oatmeal will energize you, says White. That way, you'll be more active during the first half of the day, he says.

MID-MORNING SNACK: 2 TO 4 HOURS AFTER BREAKFAST

While a morning snack is certainly not mandatory, especially if your breakfast is really heavy or you don't eat until 9:45 a.m., it's important to remember that your body takes between two and four hours to digest and absorb the food you eat, White says. After that, you're fasting.

Sticking to that window of time between breakfast and your snack will help you keep your energy levels topped off and prevent a dip in your blood sugar, he says. And that will keep you from going HAM at lunch. If you're looking for healthy snack options, research presented at the 2013 Institute of Food Technologists annual meeting found that dieters who ate a handful of almonds for a mid-morning snack wound up eating fewer calories over the course of the day. Still, it's important to only eat a mid-morning snack when you're legit hungry, says registered dietitian Betsy Opyt. Otherwise, you could wind up overdoing your calorie intake.

LUNCH: BEFORE 3 P.M.

A 2016 study in *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* followed roughly 1,300 dieters over the course of 28 weeks and found that people who ate earlier lunches had more success dropping pounds. While this was only the case in people with a specific genotype (and most of us aren't getting tested for it), the finding's in line with a previous study, published in *the International Journal of Obesity*. In that study, dieters lost about 25 percent less weight if they ate the bulk of their calories after 3 p.m.

AFTERNOON SNACK: 2 TO 4 HOURS AFTER LUNCH

Like your mid-morning snack, an afternoon snack two to four hours after lunch keeps your blood sugar levels stable and prevents overeating at dinnertime, says White. Also, in one University of Illinois at Chicago study of overweight women, those who snacked in the afternoon tended to eat significantly more fruits and vegetables throughout the course of the day compared to non-afternoon snackers. And that bodes well for your weight-loss efforts, as 2015 research out of Harvard Medical School shows that increased fruits and veggie intake is tightly linked with healthier weights.

DINNER: 5 P.M. TO 7 P.M.-ISH

In one Brigham Young University study, researchers asked 29 men to cut themselves off from the kitchen at 7 p.m. for two weeks and then eat whenever they wanted to for another two weeks. The study authors found that the guys ended up eating 244 fewer calories each day when they stopped eating after the cutoff. White says these results are probably caused by the fact that people often snack after dinner, not because the guys ate dinner any earlier.

Another recent study found that when people who usually ate a third of their calories between 6 p.m. and midnight switched to a schedule where they stopped eating between 7 p.m. and 9 a.m., they lost weight and slept better. Again, it's not so much the time they ate dinner that mattered as much as eliminating post-dinner snacking. (So if you have to eat at 8 p.m., don't freak, just make sure you're not still making trips to the fridge after.) The bottom line: This timeline might help make your weight-loss journey easier, but if you don't hit these deadlines every day, you're not doomed. "The most important thing is that you are eating a healthy diet rich in fruits, vegetables, and other whole, nutrient-rich foods—and that you're listening to your hunger cues," White says. "You should be eating when you are hungry, but not ravenous, and you should be stopping when you are satisfied, but not completely full or still hungry."