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## Better Bedtime Snacks for Kids

Fight off after-dinner hunger with these bedtime snack ideas and expert tips, all of which can help your child sleep throughout the night.

Bedtime treats sound good in theory: You can cozy up with your crew, bowls of ice cream in hand, watching a movie. But a healthy snack—rather than a sweet fave—is more likely to help your child sleep soundly.

"While he snoozes, his bones are growing and his brain is processing all that he learned during the day," explains Nancy Z. Farrell, R.D.N., a spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. "Nutritious foods help foster good sleep patterns."

The old advice about having a warm glass of milk before bed may have some truth to it. Dairy contains tryptophan, which studies have shown can increase serotonin, the calming chemical that induces sleepiness.

The new advice? Pair that milk with a graham cracker, half of a PB & J sandwich, or a bowl of cereal. You can also opt for a slice of cheese with a few crackers or yogurt with berries. Keep in mind that this snack isn't dessert; if you do want a sweet treat, offer it right after dinner.

Consider the timing, too, and serve snacks an hour before your child's regular bedtime, says Farrell. This gives him time to digest and prevents him from using hunger before bed as a stalling tactic. But if he misses that window, let him know that it's too late and he'll just have to wait until tomorrow to have something to eat.

Sally Kuzemchak, MS, RD, a registered dietitian, educator, and mom of two who blogs at Real Mom Nutrition, offers up a few more smart tips to keep in mind when it comes to snacking before bed:

### 3 Tips for Smarter Bedtime Snacks

- ***It shouldn't be an escape route from dinner.***

This is especially important when kids are younger, and bedtime may be only an hour or two after dinner. Some kids may use the bedtime snack as a way out of a dinner they're not wild about. If dinner isn't something they love (or even a new food or new dish they're uncertain about) they know they'll get yogurt or graham crackers in an hour, so why bother? This will make your child seem picky at the dinner table—and drive you crazy.

**Instead:** At dinner, be sure there are always foods on the table your child likes. So if she doesn't like the main dish, she can have a helping of the veggie or other side items. Also, be sure to serve "meal foods" at



snack time (like fruits, vegetables, and whole grains) way more often than “fun foods” (like granola bars and gummy fruit snacks). Another technique to consider: When my son went on a dinner strike as a preschooler, we started saving his plate and offering it to him later before bed. It wasn’t a punishment—simply a way to provide him with dinner at a time he may be hungrier. At first, he didn’t want his leftover dinner (because he was holding out for something better!). But soon enough, he was gladly scarfing down his spaghetti or stir-fry, just an hour or two after the rest of us (read more about that strategy).

- ***It shouldn’t be a sugar bomb.***

Kids’ diets are already so laden with added sugar, and a sugary snack may be an incentive for your child to skimp at dinner.

***Instead:*** Look at your child’s day and see where the gaps were. Did she skip fruit at lunch? Offer a banana. Did she pass up veggies at dinner? Offer some baby carrots or salsa with baked chips. Were whole grains missing today? Offer a small slice of whole grain toast with a smear of nut butter.

- ***It shouldn’t be a stalling tactic.***

Some kids may not even be hungry for a snack—but they’d really like another 15 minutes with Mom and Dad! So look at your child’s eating schedule and see if a bedtime snack is justified. If dinner is at 6pm and bedtime is at 7pm, a snack probably doesn’t make sense.

***Instead:*** If you decide to do a bedtime snack, plan for it so it won’t interfere with the bedtime process. And always give your child the option (so she’s not eating when she’s not hungry)—maybe a snack or an extra story? Set a time for the snack and give your child a couple of nutritious choices.