

Healthy snacking options

Even if you are trying to stick to your healthy eating plan, mid-morning hunger pangs and the long stretch ahead till your next big meal can make it very tempting to give in to treats in the biscuit barrel at home, or from the vending machine at work to keep you going till lunch. Whilst a couple of biscuits or packet of crisps isn't going to do you any harm if the rest of your diet is healthy, the secret to healthy snacking is moderation and balance.

By planning ahead, following my top tips and snacking suggestions guide, you might be surprised what delicious snack options are on offer and far from being unhealthy, they could help to boost your healthy eating efforts even further.

Top tips:

- Try to use the 'NHS Food & Diet' section (<http://www.nhs.uk/LiveWell/Goodfood/Pages/Goodfoodhome.aspx>) as a quick, 'at a glance' guide for choosing healthier snacks. Think about the proportions of the different food groups (carbohydrates /starchy foods; fruits and vegetables; milk and dairy foods; meat; fish and non-dairy alternatives; fat and sugar containing foods) and whether you can use your snacks to ensure that your overall diet is balanced.
- Try not leave more than three or four hours between eating a meal or snack. If you are eating regularly, you will help keep your blood sugar levels stable which can help prevent strong feelings of hunger and overeating the next time you eat.
- Don't snack in a hurry! It takes 20 minutes for your brain to register that you are full! Take your time and eat slowly, so that your brain can keep tabs on how much you've eaten and let you know when you've eaten enough.
- If you do find yourself opening a cupboard looking for that indulgent snack, drink a glass of water or have a cup of tea or coffee. It is well known that we often confuse thirst signals for hunger.
- Don't go shopping on an empty stomach or you will be tempted to stock your cupboards up with high fat, sugar or salt treats that will be hard to resist when you get an attack of the munchies!

Smarter snacking

Here are some smart, quick and healthy snacks that taste great and will make a valuable contribution to your daily intake of essential vitamins and minerals and energy that your body needs to stay healthy and keep active.

Fruit and vegetable snacks

Incredibly versatile and packed with essential vitamins and minerals and a variety of phytochemicals (naturally occurring plant substances) that are vital for good health.

- **Crudités** — Buy a few plastic pots and pack them full of your favourite vegetable crudities — cherry tomatoes, button mushrooms, carrots batons, celery sticks so that you can take food to work, or store it in the fridge for when you are a bit peckish.
- **Smoothies** — homemade with delicious soft fruits and low fat yogurt or milk. They are a great way to help you get your 5-a-day and/or to use up your over ripened fruit. If you have not got time to make one, check the food labels of shop bought smoothie brands — some smoothies nowadays contain two portions if they contain at least 150ml of fruit juice and at least 80g of crushed fruit (or vegetable) pulp.
- **Fruit** — Always have plenty of seasonal fruits to hand at home or on the go. Apples, pears, tangerines, satsumas, bananas, oranges, grapes, strawberries, blueberries, blackberries etc. An 80g portion of fresh fruit counts towards your 5-a-day.
- **Dried fruits** — Apricots, raisins, sultanas, dates, figs. Dried fruit is basically fresh fruit with all its water removed, which makes it sweeter and a great snack to satisfy your sweet craving. A heaped tablespoon (around 30g) counts towards one of your 5-a-day, as well as providing valuable fibre. Once again, be careful not to eat too many as they are higher in sugar calories than fresh fruit which is not good news for your waistline or teeth.

Carbohydrates/Starchy snacks

Carbohydrate is the body's main source of energy. The body breaks carbohydrate down to fuel your body — everything from breathing to thinking.

- **Cereal bars** — are also a good snack option as they contain many nutritious ingredients such as oats and grains. But if the bar contains nuts, dried fruit and chocolate chips, they can be quite high in calories. Check the labels to compare brands and opt for wholegrain or oat bars that are marked

with a green traffic light label, ([Web Link to Nutrition labeling](#)) indicating a low fat, saturated fat, sugar and/or salt content.

- Rice cakes, oat cakes — Slightly boring on their own but a good source of soluble fibre to help control your blood sugar and fat levels. They can soon be transformed into something tasty, so try and get creative!
- Unsalted/plain popcorn — a perhaps surprising healthy alternative to crisps. Popcorn is actually a wholegrain and a source of fibre keeping you feeling fuller for longer. The healthiest popcorn is made from scratch using only a little vegetable oil. And try to cut out the butter, sugar and salt to keep its nutritional benefits.
- A bowl of cereal — The average content of a bowl of cereal with semi-skimmed milk is around 170 calories, which is far less than the biscuits or pastry you might eat mid-morning when you are hungry. Choose a wholegrain variety for an extra fibre boost.
- Hot cross buns — They are not just for Easter. With their fruit and fibre content, they are definitely an all round healthy choice for those wanting a hot toasted snack.

Protein rich snacks

Protein is needed for growing and repairing the body, and for energy.

- Nuts and seeds — Pistachios, cashew, almonds, walnuts, hazelnuts, brazil nuts, unsalted peanuts. Linseeds (Flaxseeds), sunflower seeds, pumpkin seeds. Each brimming with array of nutrients from beneficial omega 3 and omega 6 fats, selenium, calcium, iron, zinc, vitamin E etc. But a word of caution: if you're watching your weight, don't eat too many. Watch out because nuts are high in fat (although most of it is good unsaturated fat), so only eat in moderate amounts. Unconsciously nibbling on a 100g small packet throughout the day would set you back around 600 to 700 calories!
- Sushi — A combination of white rice and raw fish, including heart healthy omega 3 rich salmon and tuna. This highly nutritious, low-fat Japanese food makes an ideal healthy snack. Widely available now in supermarkets and sushi bars if you are out and about.
- Peanut butter on a slice of wholemeal toast, or even a peanut butter and banana sandwich, is a rich source of heart-healthy monounsaturated fats and vitamin E. It's also an excellent source of protein to keep you feeling full for longer.

- Lower fat hummus with wholemeal pitta dippers. Made of chickpeas, hummus is a tasty, yet healthy snack providing a valuable source of protein, soluble fibre and healthy unsaturated fats.
- Nutella on half a wholegrain bagel. Perhaps a surprising choice of snack, as it is high in fat and calories. But in moderation (15g or around 2 teaspoons) Nutella, which is packed full of hazelnuts, is a good source of protein and has a lower glycaemic index so it absorbed slowly by the body and will not causing a sharp rise in your blood sugar levels.

Dairy rich snacks

An important source of calcium for strong bones and teeth. Snacking on dairy foods can help you reach your recommended two to three servings of dairy foods each day.

- Milkshake — A delicious, nutritious and refreshing alternative to sugar laden fizzy drinks. Make your own using ice cold semi-skimmed, 1% fat or skimmed milk. Throw in fresh strawberries or banana and whizz together.
- Yogurts — It does not have to be plain. There are lots of delicious low fat, low sugar yogurts on offer in our supermarkets waiting to be indulged — greek, natural, fruity, flavoured, frozen, active. The list goes on and on!
- Low fat hot chocolate, made with semi skimmed, 1% fat or skimmed milk. A bit of soothing chocolate indulgence without all of the calories and fat.
- Cottage cheese — Perfect accompaniment to many crackers and ever popular among dieters and some health food devotees due to its low fat content. Check out the varieties on offer nowadays — cottage cheese with pineapple, chives, prawns, sun- dried tomatoes etc. Alternatively, just buy plain and add lots of delicious ingredients yourself.

Fat and sugar containing snacks

These foods belong to the smallest group in the eatwell plate and include foods such as crisps, biscuits, cakes, chocolate and sweets. It is okay to have these foods but only in small amounts, so try and save them for an occasional treat.

For those snacks that are high in sugar, it's also worth remembering that it is better for your teeth to have it at mealtimes, when other foods can help to lessen the effect of sugar on your teeth, rather than between meals.

Don't forget to get into the habit of checking food labels when shopping. The traffic light system and Guideline Daily Amounts on food labels are there to help you and can be very useful in alerting you to snack foods that are high in fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt.

Good choice:

Fat content is 3 grams or less per 100g

Saturated fat content is 1.5 grams or less per 100g

Sugar content is 5 grams or less per 100g

Salt content is 0.3 grams or less per 100g

Occasional choice:

Fat content is 20 grams or more per 100g

Saturated fat content is 5 grams or less per 100g

Sugar content is 15 grams or more per 100g

Salt content is 1.5 grams or more per 100g

For more information on healthy snacking and eating a healthy balanced diet, check out:

<http://www.bda.uk.com/> British Dietetic Association. Healthy Snacks Fact Sheet

<http://www.nutrition.org.uk/> British Nutrition Foundation. Healthy Snacking

<http://www.food.gov.uk/multimedia/pdfs/publication/eatwellplate0907.pdf> Eatwell Plate. NHS