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Late-night snack attacks? Your brain might be the culprit

Late-night cravings may stem from brain chemistry, not lack of willpower

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Summer has arrived. Yet, despite resolutions to stay fit, there's one habit that seems nearly impossible to shake off: late-night snacking.

If your evenings inevitably end with a visit to the refrigerator or a delivery app opened around midnight, you might be experiencing what's known as "night-eating syndrome."

Night-eating syndrome, a relatively common but often overlooked condition, involves frequent episodes of eating large amounts of food during late-night hours. Individuals with this syndrome usually consume 25 percent or more of their daily calories after dinner, often waking up at night specifically to eat.

More than just simple midnight cravings, this eating pattern often stems from complex biological and psychological factors, such as stress and disruptions to your circadian rhythm.

Yoo Eun-jeong, a psychiatrist specializing in eating disorders, explains that night-eating syndrome is closely linked to the brain's reward system and stress-response mechanisms.

"Many people think dieting is simply a matter of willpower. But, actually, the urge to eat late at night is more a brain issue than a personal failing," Yoo explained.

"Stress or anxiety triggers hormonal imbalances and disrupts neurotransmitters such as serotonin and dopamine, increasing your appetite — especially for sweet, salty or fatty foods."

Jo Ara, a professor of family medicine at Gangnam Severance Hospital, echoed similar thoughts. She noted that about 1.5 percent of the general population experiences night-eating syndrome, but among obese patients, this figure can rise to nearly 10 percent.

Jo further explained that nighteating syndrome disrupts the body's internal clock, known as the circadian rhythm, leading to hormonal imbalances.

"In night-eating syndrome, the production of melatonin, a hormone crucial for sleep, and leptin, a hormone responsible for suppressing appetite, decreases. This imbalance leads to sleep disorders and uncontrolled nighttime eating," she said.

Yoo added that night-eating syndrome is deeply connected to the brain's chemistry and emotional regulation, specifically through dopamine, a neurotransmitter associated with pleasure and reward.

She said that late-night eating often acts as a quick "dopamine hit" for the brain. Each snack consumed during stressful or anxious moments reinforces the brain's reward circuit, making nighttime eating an addictive behavior rather than a simple matter of hunger or habit.

"Individuals often eat at night as a way of managing emotions such as anxiety, depression or stress," Yoo explained. "The brain gradually associates food with emotional relief, creating a powerful cycle of dependency."

Moreover, she highlighted a harmful sleep-eating loop: "Many sufferers feel they must eat to sleep. This becomes a conditioned response — the brain connects eating with restful sleep, thus reinforcing the unhealthy habit further."

Assess Yourself: Is it just a snack or something more?

How can you tell if your midnight snacking is a mere habit or something more serious? Here is an expanded self-assessment checklist based on expert guidelines:

* Do you eat more food after dinner than at any other meal?
* Do you frequently wake up specifically to eat at night?
* Do you experience strong feelings of guilt or shame after nighttime eating?
* Do you regularly skip breakfast or feel no appetite in the morning?
* Do you struggle to fall asleep before 1 a.m.?
* Do you often find yourself eating right up until the moment you fall asleep?
* Is your bedtime inconsistent from night to night?
* Do you binge eat when feeling depressed or stressed?
* Have you experienced significant weight fluctuations or noticed increased abdominal fat?

If you answered “yes” to four or more of these questions, you might have night-eating syndrome.

Thankfully, night-eating syndrome can be managed. Professor Jo emphasized practical solutions to break the habit and restore your body’s natural rhythm:

“First, restoring your disrupted circadian rhythm is crucial. Skipping breakfast often leads to prolonged fasting, which can trigger overeating at night. Even a small breakfast can significantly help,” she recommended.

She suggested that those who cannot eat breakfast at least have a hearty lunch. Getting enough sunlight during the day and engaging in regular physical activity can also reset your internal clock.

“To better manage nighttime cravings, gradually move your dinner time earlier and aim for an earlier bedtime. If that’s not possible, slightly delaying dinner to later in the evening might help. When hunger inevitably strikes, opt for low-calorie foods like warm milk, bananas, or almonds, which aid sleep,” she said.

If these approaches do not alleviate symptoms, Professor Jo recommended seeking professional help.