- Eating customs

How to snack healthily at work

Here's how to have better munching habits when afternoon energy slumps strike.

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WHEN Claire Pare was a classroom teacher, working in a setting where every minute, down to the bathroom breaks, was scheduled, she brought granola bars, fruit and protein shakes to school so she'd be prepared when hunger hits.



Then she transitioned to a job at education publisher Mcgraw Hill. Working remotely at home in New Hampshire, her children's cheddar bunny crackers and Fruit Roll-ups lured her to the pantry, confounding her commitment to healthy snacking.

"I have the opportunity to be judicious, but I choose not to most of the time," Pare said. "I really do enjoy being able to put the time into making something, but oftentimes convenience just has to win out."

Eating healthy snacks during the workday can be challenging. Many people find themselves facing down a mid-afternoon slump and accompanying sugar, caffeine or carbohydrate cravings after lunch.

Busy adults racing from backto-back meetings to family commitments often reach for what's easy, whether it's a candy bar from the office vending machine or potato chips from a kitchen cupboard.

The problem with eating packaged sugary or salty snacks to get through the afternoon is they may spike blood sugar levels but don't give a sustained second wind, according to Beth Czerwony, a registered dietitian at Cleveland Clinic.

"It's going to burn off really fast, so you're going to get that boost of energy and then all of a sudden you're going to get another crash," Czerwony said.

"Some people just chase that for a while, and they're drinking coffee or their energy drinks and they're eating their candy, and it just sets you up for these spikes and these drops."

Here are some ideas for maintaining healthy snacking habits at work.

What are good snacks?

Foods that are high in protein, such as Greek yogurt, hardboiled eggs, cottage cheese and beef or turkey jerky, can help people feel full for longer periods of time than snacks without protein, said Caroline Susie, a Dallasbased registered dietitian and spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics.

Eating a snack consisting of refined carbohydrates such as a bagel causes blood sugar to rise rapidly and then drop, so teaming it up with another source of nutrition is preferable, Susie said.

"When you pair that carbohydrate with lean protein or have a protein-forward choice, it contributes to satiety. So you're just going to stay fuller longer," she added.

Czerwony recommends snacks that combine lean proteins with complex carbohydrates such as crackers, rice cakes or fruit.

The combination works because carbohydrates raise blood sugar, giving you a boost, while the protein takes longer to digest, helping to sustain you for longer, she said.

"The carbohydrates are like the kindling on the fire, and then the proteins are the logs," Czerwony said. "You're going to get the slow burn from the protein, but you need that sudden start, so you have the carbohydrates to get you going."

Many people find it hard to resist crunchy foods. For a satisfying munch, the American Heart Association recommends sliced apples with a tablespoon of low-sodium peanut butter, pears dipped in reduced-fat cottage cheese, vegetables such as carrots, celery, bell peppers, cucumber or zucchini paired with hummus or tzatziki sauce, popcorn, rice cakes or unsalted nuts and seeds.

You can also roast chickpeas, which provide both protein and carbohydrates.

For a packaged snack, read the nutrition label to check how much added sugar and sodium it contains, the association suggests.

The Cleveland Clinic recommends whole fruit, edamame, seeds, a handful of nuts or a single-serving package of tuna that you can eat with a fork. Bringing your own snacks to work can help you control the quality and quantity of what you eat, Czerwony said.

Try slicing vegetables, cheese or low-fat meats on weekends to last through the week, she said. "If you have all that stuff already made, then it's easy in the morning to just grab it and go," she said.

Take along a small, soft-sided cooler to help keep snacks like yogurt, sliced veggies or hummus fresh. "Get cute little bento boxes, get little containers, make it fun if that's something that you want to do, because we'll eat things that are more

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Beth Czerwony

attractive instead of just being in a Ziploc," Czerwony said.

Prepare in advance

Petra Durnin, a Los Angelesbased senior director at commercial real estate firm JLL, blends greens, nuts, berries, avocado, banana and chia or flax seeds into homemade smoothies, which she makes in large batches.

At night, she moves one jar to the fridge to thaw for the next day. An afternoon smoothie keeps her full until dinnertime and less likely to reach for chips, chocolate and sugar, she said.

“I feel like I have better brain clarity,” Durnin said.
“I’m able to push through the afternoon and work more efficiently. I don’t feel bloated, bogged down. It just feels better.”
Adopting healthy snacking habits doesn’t mean you have to deprive yourself entirely of treats. If a coworker is celebrating a birthday, an occasional slice of cake won’t completely derail healthy habits.
“Let’s not demonise food,” Susie said.
Before dipping into a bag of chips, eat a meal that includes lean protein, complex carbohydrates and healthy fat, and then add something healthy to the snack while keeping an eye on portion size, Susie said.
“There’s not going to be a perfect substitute for chips. You can eat carrots all you want, but you can’t trick your body with thinking that they’re chips,” Czerwony said.
“If you want a chip, have the stinking chip and just be done with it.”
However, a constant hankering for chips could be a sign of a dietary deficiency, and it’s worth figuring that out so “those types of things are more treats than something that’s in the routine mix of what you’re eating throughout the day,” Czerwony said.
Gisela Marx, 53, rarely gets a chance to sit or eat while working as deputy front of house manager at the Auditorium Theater in Chicago. On event days, she works from 3pm until 11pm or later.
She packs healthy snacks such as watermelon and nuts.
She also keeps an emergency stash of Reese’s Pieces, which her boss has to replenish if he eats the last one.
“Just having it there is a comfort. I can always have it if I want it,” Marx said. – AP