



Overcoming Cravings with Healthy Snacking 101

Christopher Cirino

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Whether you are attempting weight loss or just looking to maintain, healthy snacking is an integral part of what you eat. Earlier on in my personal journey, snacking became a placeholder to eat the foods that I craved. Let's face it, with the added stress of social isolation and pandemic, many of us are indulging our cravings. This article will provide some tips on healthy eating, so that the cravings don't sabotage your efforts.

The Neuroscience of Cravings

Cravings start in the brain within the limbic system (rewards system), specifically the ventral tegmental area. During the starvation state, such as in between meals or in the morning after sleep, the brain sends out signals to your conscious state. This is when dopamine levels are lower, and inhibitory pathways of the [dorsolateral prefrontal cortex](#) are blunted (inhibit an inhibitory pathway => eat cravings). When the body is in a state of hunger, it often asks for higher calorie foods (*insert your go-to snacks here*).

At the same time, the uncomfortable state of [hunger](#) triggers one to eat. Your glycogen stores in the liver and muscles deplete sufficiently, causing glucose levels to decrease relative to early post-prandial states (after meal). In the hypothalamus, two proteins **neuropeptide Y** and **agouti-related peptide** signal hunger. There are also hormones from the gut that trigger appetite: **ghrelin** produced by the stomach; **insulin-like peptide** (IL-5) produced by the colon; other hormones that ready the intestines for food. **Leptin** is produced by adipose cells (fat cells) that provides an inhibitory signal to the hypothalamus ([lateral hypothalamic area](#)) to regulate food intake, body weight and prevent obesity.



Pepe Finds His

Way by Christopher Cirino

Managing Cravings

The best way to manage cravings is to gain a better understanding of your eating habits. This may require journaling or just working toward [mindful eating](#). Start with taking a pause and asking yourself some questions:

- Which foods do I reach for when I am feeling stressed, tired, lonely, or really hungry (Did I skip a meal? etc.)

- What are the first foods that my mind "feeds me" when I wake up?
- How do I eat the food when I am hungry? Am I standing up or sitting down? Did I prepare foods or am I ordered to-go or fast foods? Do I eat directly from the refrigerator or the cabinets?
- Am I eating too quickly?

Take some time to think about the questions above. I can tell you that when I feel stressed or really hungry, I'll start in the cupboard and grab the chips and eat standing up with salsa until satisfied. I have to take a pause before I do that, so that I can prepare a proper meal and avoid the snacking. When I wake up in the morning, images of chocolate or cashews come to my mind. Usually the images are your favorite high calorie foods or foods that you might have in your pantry already.

Tips to Keeping a Snack a Snack

Transitioning to practical advice, I first want to acknowledge that any parent has gained keen insight on keeping a snack a snack and the effects of indulging cravings. When your child eats a snack like a meal and a meal like a snack, if that, or belts out statements like, "I don't know why but I am not hungry," it is a good reminder to the amount and purpose of a snack: small and spaced out in between meals. Think of a snack as a way to overcome those serious cravings (i.e. for the high calorie foods), and maintain healthy eating throughout the day.

Since the typical snack can be relatively one dimensional (e.g. ultra-processed carbohydrates), a change in **how much** or **what constitutes the snack** will ensure that you still eat a well-balanced diet. If a snack comprises a variety of vegetables, it may even be enough to ensure that it's nutritious or even can replace a meal.

General Dietary Tips

- Water is for hydrating and should be your go-to drink; keep hydrated
- There is no great benefit in calorie counting; when you eat whole foods, you can generally eat more (1 bag of spinach = calories of 1 slice of bread - but a lot better for you!)
- Focus on your mood and pace of eating - start with a pause in mind
- Try to eat the most natural form of a food
 - Almond protein bar-> almonds, orange juice->oranges
- Rough estimate: Keep 3/4 total food intake as vegetable sources
- Avoid "wolves in sheep clothing"
 - Flavored yoghurt, sweet sauces, "whole grain" bread and tortillas, cereals
- Serve the carbohydrates as side dishes
- "[Hare Hachi Bu](#)" or "eat until 8/10th full" is a useful Confucian practice
- Pace your meals out about 4-5 hours apart with first meal around 7-9 am and last meal around 4-6 pm, allowing 4-5 hours of fasting before sleeping
- You gained weight over time, don't expect to lose it quickly; If you "cheat", there is always your next meal, don't skip it

Healthy Snack Options

Below are a few options that you can include in between breakfast and lunch or lunch and dinner:

- A handful of almonds, cashews, sunflower seeds
- Dried seaweed

- Beef/turkey jerky
- Small bowl of plain yoghurt or ricotta cheese
- Small piece of mozzarella cheese
- A bowl of baby spinach, kale or arugula or sprouts, olive oil and salt
- 1 Hard boiled egg

[Iris Briand, RDN](#) one of my colleagues in Portland, Oregon shared with me the list below of simple snack ideas. She is an excellent nutritionist, with whom I have collaborated in health seminars. She provides nutrition consultations in person or online conferencing. I highly recommend her for nutrition coaching and diabetic nutrition education.

Simple Snack Ideas

1. Celery, carrots, sugar snap peas, bell peppers, cucumbers, or apple/pear + 1 TBL nut or seed butter (almond, peanut, pecan, sunflower or cashew butter)

2. Sliced veggies + 2 TBL hummus (look for ones without preservatives like potassium sorbate) + 1/2 small avocado (optional)

3. Apple, pear, or orange + small handful nuts or seeds

Nuts to include: walnuts, cashews, almonds, brazil nuts, pecans, peanuts, macadamia nuts, hazelnuts, pistachios, sunflower/pumpkin seeds

4. Hard boiled egg with sea salt + sliced veggies + 1 or 2 TBL hummus

5. Small handful of homemade trail mix; examples of ingredients:

pecans, hazelnuts, peanuts, organic raisins/prunes, sea salt

6. 1 oz cheese (approx. size of a your thumb) + sliced veggies + a few Mary's Gone Crackers "Superseed Everything"

***Cheese: look for organic (or at least rBST hormone-free) raw-milk cheese or**

aged pasteurized cheese is fine, such as white cheddar, gouda, jarlsberg, gruyere, asiago, parmesan, manchego, chevre, bleu, brie)

7. Lettuce wrap: a few ounces of leftover tempeh, chicken, turkey, or beef wrapped in lettuce and a little mayo/mustard

***Feel free to combine for a “snack plate lunch or dinner”**