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## **Diet Snacking Constitutes 25 Percent of Calories Consumed in U.S.**

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(HealthNewsDigest.com) - CHICAGO – Snacking, especially beverage consumption outside of a regular meal, continues to increase among Americans, accounting for more than 25 percent of calorie intake each day, according to research presented at the 2011 Institute of Food Technologists (IFT) Annual Meeting & Food Expo®.

Between 1977 and 2006, snacking in the American diet has grown to constitute "a full eating event," or a fourth meal, averaging about 580 calories each day, said Richard D. Mattes, Ph.D., professor of foods and nutrition at Purdue University.

The amount of secondary eating and drinking – consumption while engaged in another activity – has also increased. Between 2006 and 2008, time spent eating primary meals – breakfast, lunch and dinner – remained consistent at 70 minutes. However, secondary eating doubled from 15 minutes each day in 2006 to nearly 30 minutes in 2008, and secondary drinking jumped nearly 90 percent from 45 to 85 minutes.

While snacking has increased in general, "there has been a significant increase in the amount of calories consumed through beverages," said Mattes. Today, beverages account for 50 percent the calories consumed through snacking.

As many Americans don't equate beverages as readily with calorie intake, they are less likely to offset or take into account these calories, said Mattes.

In general, however, snacking is not linked with weight gain, according to G. Harvey Anderson, Ph.D., Department of Nutritional Sciences at the University of Toronto. "The literature does not support the intuitive notion that increased consumption of snack foods is an independent cause of obesity," said Anderson. In fact for some age groups - young children and older adults, for example – "foods consumed outside a meal are important sources of nutrients as well as energy."

To further assess the impact of snacking on the American diet and health, a definitive definition of what constitutes a snack, as well as more information on what motivates individuals to snack, is desperately needed, said Nancy Auestad, Ph.D., of the Dairy Research Institute.

Nearly 100 percent of Americans in all age groups eat a snack each day, yet no standard definition exists on what constitutes a snack or what motivates individuals to snack, said Auestad. Without a clear definition, consumers are "self-defining" snacks and snacking, "and the line between snacks and meals are blurred."

Snacking can be part of a balanced and healthy diet, said Auestad. "Good tasting snacks that provide dietary fiber, vitamin D, calcium and potassium can help consumers meet recommended intakes."

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