

## U.S. Is Becoming a Nation of Snackers



June 23, 2011 -- When is a snack not really a snack, but a mini-meal or even a full-on meal? And can snacking -- even serial snacking -- result in [weight gain](#)?

The answers depend on both the snacker and his or her chosen snack, according to experts speaking recently at the Institute of Food Technologists 2011 Annual Meeting and Food Expo in New Orleans.

But one thing is clear: Snacking is on its way to becoming a national pastime. Snacks, including calorie-laden beverages, comprise more than one-quarter of our daily caloric intake. Beverages, whether sugary sodas or frothy, flavored coffee drinks, make up 50% of our daily snacking calories.

We also spend a lot more time noshing on snacks today than ever before. In 2008, we snacked for about 30 minutes a day, up from 15 minutes in 2006, and we spend about 85 minutes a day drinking our snacks.

Snacks are more of an eating event or fourth meal for some, says Richard D. Mattes, PhD, a professor of food and nutrition at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Ind.

## **The Skinny on Snacking**

"There is a lot of controversy as to whether or not snacking contributes to weight gain and how important it is as a source of useful nutrients," Mattes says.

Part of the problem is that there is not a good definition of what constitutes a snack, he says. For example, if the first thing you put in your mouth is a granola bar at 10 a.m., is it a snack or a meal?

Mary Ellen Camire, PhD, a fellow of the Institute of Food Technologists and a professor of food science and human nutrition at the University of Maine in Orono, agrees: "One person's snack is another person's meal and vice versa."

According to Mattes, snacking isn't healthy or unhealthy. "It is what you eat and how it fits into your daily lifestyle," he says. "If your snacks add a lot of calories that are not offset by eating less at other times or increasing [physical activity](#), it will cause weight gain."

Eating or drinking a high-calorie snack means that should rein in your next meal or get more physical activity to work off the extra calories, he says.

"Snacks should be a part of total [diet](#) and be healthy," he says. This doesn't mean you can never have a bag of chips or a chocolate bar, he says. "You can include something that is not nutrient-dense as long as one adjusts so that it is part of the total energy package."

## **Smart Snacking**

Sheah Rarback, RD, a nutritionist at the Miller School of Medicine of the University of Miami, says a snack is a time, not a meal, and snacking can have an important role in filling in nutritional gaps.

If you are not a milk drinker and need to bone up on [calcium](#), a healthy between-meal snack, such as a smoothie made with soy milk and fruit, can help fill in these gaps.

"Some people do well eating three meals a day and some people do better with five mini-meals or snacks per day, and some need a 100-calorie snack in between meals," she says.

While she is a supporter of snacks and snacking, Rarback draws the line at high-calorie beverages.

"This doesn't meet any nutritional needs and these drinks have no [protein](#), which is what often leaves you feeling fuller," she says.

"As researchers work toward a common definition of snacking to guide future research and recommendations, it is important to remember that foods and beverages consumed as snacks can be part of a balanced, healthy diet," says Nancy Auestad, PhD, of the Dairy Research Institute in

Rosemont, Ill., in an email. "Choosing nutrient-rich snacks that include fruits, vegetables, whole grains and lower fat dairy products can help consumers meet dietary recommendations."

### **Snacker Beware: You Are What You Snack**

Camire says snacking and weight gain don't have to go hand-in-hand.

"If you snack on something healthy that will make you feel full and provide important nutrients, snacking can be a positive tool," she says.

If you routinely choose unhealthy snacks and make equally unhealthy choices for meals, don't be surprised if you start packing on the pounds.