

Can I Eat Carbs at Night?

The old saying goes, "Breakfast for a king, lunch for a prince, dinner for pauper." But do you need to eat less, particularly carbohydrate at night. Nutritionist Matt O'Neill offers some practical advice.

Can I still eat carbohydrates after 6pm? The simple answer is, "Yes you can - just make sure you don't overeat." It's over consumption of food late in the day, or "back-loading" calories as Ellen Coleman, leading US dietitian calls it, which is the likely cause of weight gain related to night-time eating.

It's hard to find any conclusive metabolic evidence that carbohydrates or any food eaten at night is more likely to be stored as body fat. Metabolism drops when you are sleeping, but that simply lowers your daily energy expenditure and its 24-hour energy balance (energy in versus energy out) that really matters for weight gain or loss. For fat loss there appears to be no difference in success between eating three square meals or eating more often as long as total energy intake remains the same.

The January 2005 editorial in the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition (AJCN) states, "Simply put, the question of whether there is a health benefit from the consumption of small meals will ultimately depend on how much energy is consumed, as opposed to how often or how regularly one eats."

Eat regularly: A study in the same issue of the AJCN suggests that keeping the meal pattern constant does have metabolic advantages. Researchers compared a regular meal pattern (6 meals a day) versus a "chaotic" meal pattern of anywhere between 3 and 9 eating occasions on different days for two weeks. The regular meal pattern was associated with a greater thermic effect of food (energy cost of digestion and absorption), lower energy intake, and lower fasting total and LDL ('bad') cholesterol. There was also a slightly lower postprandial (after-meal) insulin concentration with the regular pattern. All these factors suggest choosing a pattern and sticking to it, rather than skipping meals will assist with fat loss.

Let's get practical: The above evidence provides an answer that food eaten at night is not more likely to end up stored as body fat. Even so, we still need to consider the reasons why people often eat too much at night and counter these with some targeted practical advice.

Why you may overeat at night

Lack of planning: If you don't eat enough during the day you risk greater hunger at night. If you skip breakfast, are too busy for lunch or forget to snack you leave yourself open to overeating in the evening. By planning your food for the day, taking time out to eat regularly you can satisfy your fuel needs and avoid overfilling late in the day.

Eating habits: Habits are powerful behavioural patterns that allow us to perform many of our daily tasks without conscious effort. Showering, dressing and teeth cleaning are good habits that for most of us happen on autopilot. Unfortunately, overeating at night also occurs on autopilot and the habit needs to be broken. Try serving the evening meal on a smaller plate or taking leftovers off the stove and placing them in the fridge immediately. These new habits will put the breaks on dinnertime feasting.

Social pressure: Your diet may stay on track until you come home to sit down at the table with other people. You may feel obliged to eat everything that's served by your caring partner, mother or friend. You can also simply overeat over long social meals. To manage this feeding pressure, make your diet plans known to those at home. Recruiting their support to serve less or change what you eat at dinner will work in your favour. And as for the belief that you should clean your plate, learn a new mantra, "It's better to go in the waste than around my waist!"

Emotional escape: After a stressful day, food can sooth and relax. Chocolate, ice cream, cake and chips work well at delivering instant relief. Eating is also an effective short-term strategy to beat night time boredom. Helping clients identify an evening stress or boredom-food link is the first step. Alternative emotional rewards or stimulation then need to be established. Ask the question, "What can you do in the evening that would reduce the need to eat?"

New guidelines

To eat less at night, focus on planning, breaking negative eating habits, social support and emotional alternatives to food. Here are two guidelines to keep in mind for your evening meal:

Catch up on your nutrition: The evening meal is an opportunity to achieve a balanced diet for that day. For example, if you've gone short on three serves of fruit during the day, aim to have some fruit salad for dessert. Eat a little less of your main dish if needed. If you've missed out on vegetables during the day, make your evening meal veggie-

based; a stir fry, vegetable lasagne or a salad.

Eat enough to get the bed: Unless you are an athlete or exercising strenuously in bed, you won't need to carbo-load at night. Serve a smaller portion, take the edge off hunger and then get an early night. If you are asleep, you won't feel hungry until morning. Then you can start another day of nutritious eating with a healthy breakfast fit for a king. The old saying still works, but for practical reasons.