

Snack Smart

Eating the right foods in between meals is key for any running situation.

By Kelly Bastone

Many people think snacks mean junk—and they probably do if they come from a cookie jar or candy bowl. But for runners, snacking is a valid nutrition strategy. It helps us fuel up for workouts, get a variety of nutrients, and spread calories evenly through the day. Snacks also sustain blood-sugar levels (which reduces cravings) and keep your [metabolism](#) high, warding off weight gain. "Without a snack to take the edge off, people eat faster, eat more, and choose higher-calorie foods because they're overly hungry," says Suzanne Farrell, R. D., a runner and spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association.

The key is to keep portions small—around 200 to 300 calories—and choose healthy, nutrient-dense foods, says Kelli Montgomery, a coach and nutrition consultant in Connecticut. By going for fruits, vegetables, [whole grains](#), and healthy fats, runners can get nutrients they may have missed at meals. But it's important to know what to choose—and when, since some foods offer runners the most benefit at particular times. Here's how to snack smart to get the fuel your body needs.

Pre-run Snack Attack

If you're like many runners, your workout often takes place hours after your last meal. Morning runners haven't eaten since last night's dinner, and late-afternoon runs take place long after lunch. To curb pre-run hunger, 30 to 60 minutes before running eat high-carb, low-fiber foods that are easy to digest and provide fast energy. You can eat some protein and fat to steady your blood sugar during a long run, but include them sparingly, says Montgomery: Fats and [protein](#) break down slowly and, like fiber, can lead to an upset stomach mid-run.

Pick This Have a piece of fruit and pair it with cottage cheese. Other options: fig cookies; half a bagel with nut butter and jam; an energy bar; sports drink.

Post-run Snack Attack

Even if you eat a meal before running, you may be hungry afterward—especially if you ran long and hard and your muscles need fuel. Choose a more substantial snack combining a 4:1 ratio of carbs to protein. The mix speeds muscle recovery, especially if eaten right away since foods consumed within 30 minutes of your workout provide the maximum recovery benefit. Not hungry? "It's okay to skip a snack after shorter, easier runs," says Montgomery. If a tough workout leaves you feeling queasy, try chocolate milk—it provides that 4:1 ratio and helps you rehydrate but won't strain your stomach.

Pick This Save half of your turkey sandwich at lunch for later as a snack with juice. Try a fruit-and-yogurt smoothie.

Pre-dinner Snack Attack

Lunch at 1 p. m. and dinner at 7 p. m. means six hours without food. "That's longer than people should go," says Farrell, who suggests eating every four hours. To stave off hunger without tons of calories, go

for fiber and protein—both are slowly digested and feel satisfying. Work in an extra serving of veggies, which are less appealing before or after a run because of their fiber content. Crave pretzels or carb-rich snacks? Measure out a portion: A 2008 study found that people who eat 100-calorie snack packages consume about 120 fewer calories a day than those who snack from a regular-size bag.

Pick This A cup of vegetable soup; salad with egg whites; hummus with carrots and celery; [yogurt](#) with berries and almonds

Bedtime Snack Attack

Sometimes the urge to snack after dinner isn't hunger but a craving for comfort food. "Evening is a big time for emotional eating, especially after a stressful day," says Farrell. Try to avoid overdoing sugary foods, which can cause a spike in blood sugar and interfere with sleep. But if you have a long run in the morning, you may need more calories before bed. Go for protein and high-fiber carbs (which top off energy stores while you sleep), or snack on high-fiber cereal: one study found that people who eat a serving of cereal 90 minutes after dinner consume fewer calories daily than those who don't have cereal.

Pick This Need a sweet? Try a portion-controlled dessert like a frozen yogurt pop. Have cereal and milk, instant oatmeal with walnuts, or low-fat cheese and crackers.

Stealth Health

They might seem like junk, but these five snacks are downright good for you.

Jerky

With seven grams of protein per serving, jerky is a healthy post-run snack—just make sure it has 480 milligrams of sodium or less per serving.

Popcorn

Four cups air-popped have only 125 calories and five grams of fiber. If you choose microwave varieties, go with 94 percent fat-free versions.

Pudding

It's a good source of calcium. Make your own with powdered mix, or buy pre-made low-fat snack cups (look for one that's vitamin D-fortified).

Dark Chocolate

High in antioxidants, dark chocolate is good for you—in moderation. Have an ounce, which is equal to six Special Dark Hershey's Kisses.

Chips and Salsa

High in vitamins and antioxidants, salsa contains just 70 calories per cup. Enjoy it with a single serving of baked, multigrain tortilla chips.