

Super Snacks

Runner-friendly munchies satisfy your cravings and offer surprising health benefits.

By Nicole Falcone

It's the middle of the afternoon, dinner is hours away, but your stomach is growling. Should you have a snack? Yes, as long as you choose wisely. When done right, snacking can be a key component of a [runner's daily diet](#), says sports nutritionist Deborah Shulman, Ph.D. "Eating every three or four hours can help control your appetite." It can also provide nutrients you need before and after a run, says Pamela M. Nisevich Bede, M.S., R.D., a nutrition consultant for Swim, Bike, Run, Eat! But be judicious with your mini-meals. Constant grazing can lead to weight gain; have just one or two snacks a day (each between 150 and 250 calories). Avoid prepackaged junk foods, and stick to whole or minimally processed options, which will not only satisfy your hunger and cravings, but also provide surprising health benefits, too.

YOU CRAVE SALT

EAT: POPCORN

High in fiber and low in calories, popcorn is also a heart-healthy food. In a study presented at the 2009 American Chemical Society national meeting, University of Scranton researchers tested a wide range of [whole grains](#) for polyphenol count. Polyphenols are antioxidant plant chemicals that may protect your body from cell and tissue damage linked to heart disease and certain cancers. Researchers found that among snack foods, popcorn has the highest polyphenol level.

YOU CRAVE SWEETS

EAT: DARK CHOCOLATE

Juggling family, work, and training is challenging, and too much stress may raise your heart-disease risk. According to a 2009 study, dark chocolate may help. Researchers gave participants 1.4 ounces of dark chocolate (the size of a matchbook) daily for two weeks. The chocolate reduced stress-hormone levels in anxious participants. There's also evidence dark chocolate may help lower blood pressure—another key to reducing heart-disease risk, says Shulman. But keep an eye on calories. "It's like red wine," says Nisevich Bede. "It can provide health benefits but should be consumed in moderation."

YOU CRAVE SOMETHING CRUNCHY

EAT: ROASTED PEANUTS

A study published in the journal *Food Chemistry* discovered that the longer peanuts are roasted, the higher their levels of antioxidants. The extra-long roasting preserves more manganese and vitamin E (which helps protect your bones and red blood cells, respectively) than lightly roasted or even raw nuts. Peanuts are rich in protein, fiber, and healthy unsaturated fats—three nutrients that help keep you feeling full. Store small bags of peanuts in your desk drawer, or make your own trail mix with peanuts, dried fruits, cereal, and pretzels, says Nisevich Bede.

YOU CRAVE A COLD DRINK

DRINK: TART CHERRY JUICE

Tart cherries have been shown to help relieve soreness; they might also be good for your heart. In a study in the *Journal of Nutrition*, participants drank about eight ounces of tart cherry juice or a placebo twice a

day for two weeks. Researchers found the juice reduced oxidative damage, which can contribute to heart disease. The juice's protective qualities come from its high level of antioxidants. "Your body creates antioxidants," says Shulman, "but it's important to eat and drink foods rich in them, too." Although juice lacks the fiber of whole fruit, "it's an excellent source of carbohydrate," says Nisevich Bede, making it a good choice for recovering after a run.

YOU CRAVE SOMETHING FILLING

EAT: CEREAL AND MILK

Turns out the breakfast of champions can help speed recovery after a tough **workout**. In a study published in 2009 in the Journal of the International Society of Sports Nutrition, cyclists rode for two hours and then ate whole-grain cereal with fat-free milk or drank a carbohydrate sports drink. Several days later they repeated the test. Researchers found the pantry staple replenishes energy stores equally as well as sports drinks. Milk also provides quality **protein**, which is ideal for muscle recovery post-run, says Shulman—making this less-expensive (and less-processed) option a smart post-run snack.

EAT BETTER: When buying cereal, skip brands that have sugar listed as the first or second ingredient. Those products contain too much sweetener to be healthy.

Shop Smart

Use these tips to find healthy snacks at the grocery store

Popcorn

POP YOUR OWN

Plain kernels contain no extra calories and taste fresher. Add herbs, spices, or nuts.

WATCH THE FAT

Choose prepackaged popcorn that's 90 percent fat-free. Or go with nonbuttered brands and add a touch of butter spray.

Dark Chocolate

BUMP UP CACAO

The higher the percentage, the more antioxidants.

AVOID ALKALI

Also called Dutch-processed, alkali destroys nutrients.

PASS ON OILS

Bars with vegetable or hydrogenated oils are of poorer quality.

Roasted Peanuts

GO FOR DRY ROASTED

Other methods that add oils or sugar up the fat and calories.

LOOK FOR SKINS

Peanuts with their skins contain high levels of antioxidants.

SKIP THE SALT

Pre-salted peanuts often have added oils.

Tart Cherry Juice

STICK WITH CHERRIES

Tart cherry juice is often blended with sweet fruits. For the most cherry antioxidants, choose brands without other fruits.

AVOID SUGAR

Buy "100 percent fruit juice" so there's no added sweetener.

Cereal

UP THE FIBER

It should have at least three to five grams of fiber per serving.

GO WHOLE

Look for whole wheat or other whole grains in the ingredients.

AVOID SUGAR

It should have fewer than seven to nine grams per 100 calories.