

Smarter Snacking

According to a USDA survey, the average number of snacks consumed has doubled over the last 30 years. Snacking by all age groups has significantly increased in recent decades. On average, snacks provide about one-third of the daily calories. For many, the snack foods and beverages contributing the most calories aren't always the most nutritious options. However snacking can be part of a healthy eating plan. With March being National Nutrition Month, we can make healthy choices when choosing snacks that provide more nutrition and less calories.

Tips for Snacking Smart

Choose snack foods from the MyPlate food groups. Choose fruits and vegetables to help you get a full range of vitamins, minerals and fiber. Carry along fresh fruits, dried fruits, packaged pre-cut vegetables for easy snacks. Snack on whole grains such as popcorn, low-fat granola bars, brown rice cakes or snack mixes with whole-grain cereal. Consume three cups per day of free or low fat dairy such as yogurt, string cheese, or cottage cheese. Eat a variety of lean protein such as meat poultry, beans, eggs, nuts and seeds.

Plan your snacking and keep it under control. Plan what to eat, how much and when to eat a snack. Planned snacking reduces the likelihood to overeat on non-healthy foods such as chips and vending machine foods. To keep snacks from replacing meals, avoid eating snacks within one to two hours of meals. Keep nutritious snacks handy. Research shows that availability often drives snack selection. If you have a pantry filled with cookies and chips, you will reach for them. Keep fresh, frozen, dried or canned, easy to grab fruits and vegetables handy. Store vegetable slices in the refrigerator and eat them with dips such as hummus or homemade bean dip. Have healthy snacks portion in snack-size bags.

Read the Nutrition Facts Label. Read labels on food products to find snacks that provide the most nutrition for your money and calories. Use the label to compare fat, calories, fiber, sodium and sugar. They can also help you with know how many serving are in the packing.

Eat snacks only when hungry. Thirst is often misinterpreted as hunger, so it is important to drink plenty of water during the day. Avoid eating snacks out of boredom or frustration; replace it with physical activity instead. Every person has varying needs when it comes to snacking depending when it comes to snacking, activity levels, portion sizes at meals and work schedule. Elderly adults and toddlers may have difficulty eating large meals because of stomach capacity and may do well with several small snacks throughout the day. Children and teens need snacks because of their growth and higher physical activity levels. Plan ahead for children's snack needs to avoid last-minute unhealthy snacking decision.

Hummus

One 15-ounce chickpeas, also called garbanzo beans, rinsed and drained, can be peeled
¼ cup fresh lemon juice, about 1 large lemon
¼ cup tahini
Half of a large garlic clove, minced
2 tablespoons olive oil, plus more for serving

½ to 1 teaspoon kosher salt, depending on taste
½ teaspoon ground cumin
2 to 3 tablespoons water
Dash of ground paprika for serving

Directions:

1. In a food processor, combine tahini and lemon juice.
2. Process for one minute. Scrape sides and process for 30 seconds.
3. Add olive oil, minced garlic, cumin and the salt to the whipped tahini and lemon juice mixture.
4. Process for 30 seconds, scrape sides and bottom of the bowl and process another 30 seconds.
5. Drain liquid from chickpeas and rinse well. You may want to remove the skins from the chickpeas to make the hummus smoother. This is optional.
6. Add half of the chickpeas to the food processor then process for 1 minute. Scrape side and add remaining chickpeas and process for 1 to 2 minutes or until thick and smooth.
7. If hummus is too thick or still have tiny bits of chickpea, slowly add 2 to 3 tablespoons of water until the consistency is perfect.
8. To serve, drizzle about 1 teaspoon of olive oil over the top and sprinkle with paprika.
9. Store in airtight container and refrigerate up to one week.
10. Hummus is great with raw vegetables, pita chips, or cracker.

Source: University of Nebraska Extension and www.inspiredtaste.net