



MEAL TIMING

Does the timing of your food intake really matter? **Angie Jefferson** looks at how when you eat may be just as important as what, and how much, you eat

My mum always told me to eat regular meals, but over recent decades eating habits have changed from the three meals-a-day set routine that our parents grew up with, towards more frequent small meals and snacking. But does it really matter if we don't eat structured meals? Is eating small and often easier for the body to handle or does it make it worse? Let's take a look at what we actually know about the impact of meal frequency on health and whether regular mealtimes really are the key to great health.

FIRST THINGS FIRST...

Before you read on, take a minute to think about your own eating pattern and what affects this. Do you have a set meal routine or do you tend to grab food and go? Life is complicated and the number of things affecting how often we eat and drink each day is huge - ranging from our



Eating a healthy breakfast helps to keep nutrient and energy levels more stable

daily routine (or lack of), family constraints, work pattern, time, cooking skills and impulse eating when visiting the garage forecourt or a vending machine for example. Understanding your own usual eating pattern and what affects it is a good starting point as you read on.

SHOULD I EAT BREAKFAST?

In short, yes! The body appears to function better

mentally, physically and metabolically after eating breakfast. Breakfast is often reported to be the 'most important meal of the day', but skipping breakfast appears to be on the increase. A wide range of studies have spotted a clear link between eating a regular breakfast and health. In fact, if you skip breakfast regularly you are:

- less likely to get all your daily nutrients, particularly fibre, vitamins and minerals;
- more likely to struggle with weight gain;
- more likely to struggle with control of cholesterol and blood sugar levels;
- and you may have a higher risk of developing heart disease and/or diabetes.

Breakfast does not have to be eaten first thing, but it's a good idea to eat within an hour or two of waking up. Breakfast recommendations

"There does appear to be some support for the 'breakfast like a king, lunch like a prince and dine like a pauper' approach to meals as we appear to be better able to digest and process foods eaten earlier in the day compared to later at night"

across the globe suggest a combination of three things: a cereal food (preferably containing fibre), a dairy food and a portion of fruit or vegetables.

WHAT ABOUT INTERMITTENT FASTING?

Some popular diets involve intermittent fasting and recommend a very low-calorie intake on some days and normal eating on others. The long-term health effects of intermittent fasting, and whether any weight reductions are maintained, is unclear as large-scale trials have not been carried out. A small number of studies have been completed, and seem to suggest that severely restricting calorie intake on some days of the week may be effective for weight loss, at least in the short term. However, if you have any medical conditions such as diabetes or hypertension, or are employed in work where safety may be compromised by fasting (for example, driving or using heavy machinery), then medical opinion should be sought before starting this type of regime.

WILL EATING MORE OFTEN HELP ME LOSE WEIGHT?

This is a hard question to answer because when it comes



Eating healthily and in a timely fashion is all in the planning!

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to weight loss 'one size does not fit all' and what works for some may not work for others. While it would make sense that eating smaller meals more often might help prevent hunger, this doesn't always seem to be the case in scientific trials. What may matter most is knowing how you feel when eating less often during a day compared to eating more often and then adapting your eating pattern to suit. Remember:

- it's hard to reach your 5-A-Day - or more - goal for fruit and vegetables without including some as between-meal snacks

“Planning healthy meals and snacks and eating at regular intervals is, for most of us, likely to give us the best chance of controlling body weight and achieving a balanced diet every day”



- a combination of late night eating with skipping breakfast appears to be the worst scenario for several health aspects.

If you skip breakfast regularly, you are more likely to struggle with weight gain

THE FUTURE OF EATING PATTERNS

The latest research is looking at whether eating patterns can influence our internal body clock (circadian rhythm) and contribute to rising levels of obesity. Our body clock is controlled by both the brain and

individual organs. Eating late at night or during the night is thought to create a mismatch between the brain and the organs involved in digestion, affecting our sleep patterns and metabolism. In addition, increasing levels of light at night (from street lighting to electronic devices) may also be changing the bodies internal rhythms and, particularly when combined with irregular eating patterns, could be contributing to weight gain. It's early days, so watch this space, but regular eating and keeping bedrooms dark could both form part of the future for weight control.

It's important to plan healthy meals and snacks to avoid a quick dash to the vending machine!



SO, SHOULD YOU TRY TO EAT REGULAR MEALS?

Having looked at a wide range of science into meal patterns and their effects on health, it isn't possible to say for sure what the perfect number of meals is each day. However, there does appear to be some support for the 'breakfast like a king, lunch like a prince and dine like a pauper' approach to meals as we appear to be better able to digest and process foods eaten earlier in the day compared to later at night.

In the UK, we tend to eat smaller breakfast and lunchtime meals, and a larger meal in the evening and so this may be something that's worth thinking about for you and your family. Eating less at night could have the potential to lower both

cholesterol and blood sugar levels, and help to achieve better sleep patterns.

Regular eating patterns may also make it easier for families to eat together. Family mealtimes have a positive impact on food and nutrient intakes and are more social, allowing sharing of the highs and lows of life.

Many people find that hunger has a negative effect on their mood and ability to concentrate, resulting in a quick dash to the cupboard or vending machine.

Planning healthy meals and snacks and eating at regular intervals is, for most of us, likely to give us the best chance of controlling body weight and achieving a balanced diet every day.

References available upon request.

Eating less at night could help to achieve better sleep patterns

AUTHOR BIO

Since qualifying as a Registered Dietitian, Angie Jefferson BSc (Hons) RD, R.Nutr has researched, written and discussed with consumers and health professionals almost every aspect of diet and health. Her overriding aim is to deliver simple positive messages for optimal nutrition within a healthy lifestyle.

