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Smart Snacking – A question I get asked a lot is, “what is better – eating 3 meals a day or 5-6 smaller meals?” The answer is clearly, “it depends.” It depends on what makes you feel more energized, it depends on your food choices, it depends on how much you are eating (are you eating small meals), and it depends on your day-to-day schedule.

If you're wondering which meal plan would work better for you to reach your goals, ask yourself the following questions:

Do you tend to skip meals? You may not feel hungry for a meal when you are busy, but when you finally have time to rest you may experience overwhelming hunger. This can often lead you to reach for unhealthy foods for quick energy, or cause you to overeat later. If this sounds familiar, having a snack or meal every three to five hours even when you are not hungry can help you avoid the hunger roller coaster ride while keeping you focused and energized.

Do you have to wait a long time between meals? Some people may have schedules that force them to wait seven to eight hours between meals. Some foods last longer than others, but after about four hours the energy and the sense of fullness that most foods provide will start to fade. It is normal to get hungry when you wait long stretches without meals and this is an appropriate reason to snack.

Do you feel hungry between meals? If you have been more active recently or you had just a small meal you may feel hungry between meals. If your stomach is feeling empty, hollow or growling you may need a snack to keep you energized until your next meal.

But on the other hand... Snacking can also become a problem for your health if you are often eating out of boredom, hitting the afternoon energy slump, to cope with stress or to help forget sadness. Another example that is a common habit is always having a snack when watching TV. If you are snacking for these reasons rather than eating to manage your hungry and energy level on a regular basis you may need to find a distraction or a different way to cope since these are calories your body isn't asking for. Remember, if the reason you are eating has to do with hunger then your solution should involve food. But if you are feeling some other emotion then your solution should not involve food.

Choosing the right snack can also be challenging. The word snack automatically makes many people think about chips or cookies, but snacks are still part of a healthy diet – not in addition to a healthy diet.

For a filling and energizing snack choose combine foods that have fiber and protein. Foods that contain fiber are fruits, vegetables, whole grains, nuts and legumes. Foods that contain significant amounts of protein are meat, cheese, milk, nuts and legumes. If you only have an hour to wait until your next meal choose one food group such as a piece of fruit or 1/3 cup nuts. If you have to wait 2-3 hours you will likely need a snack with two food groups like an apple with a tablespoon of peanut butter or yogurt with small banana.

Everyone's lifestyle, health, schedule and taste is different so there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to snacking. It may take some trial and error to determine when you need a snack and what foods will work best for you. Your body will tell you what it needs, you just need to listen to it and trust it.