

Which is Better: 3 or 5 Daily Meals?



Have you wondered if it's healthier to eat several mini meals or three larger meals each day? The internet is rife with anecdotes and theories about the benefits of eating frequently throughout the day. The science, however, is far less clear about whether one way is any better than the other.

Snacking Science:

Snacking could help you control your appetite, or it might just have you eating more calories overall. Early studies suggested that people who ate often weighed less than those who ate infrequently. This gave rise to the notion that snacking or grazing could boost metabolism or reduce calorie intake. But when researchers took another look at the data and omitted the results of those people who probably underreported their food intake, the story changed. Now it showed that frequent snackers actually weighed more.

Recent studies are conflicting, with some showing that frequent snackers weigh more and some showing that they weigh less. There are lots of potential reasons for conflicting information, including how the researchers defined a snack or mini meal and whether they counted beverages.

Dieters who snack to boost their metabolic rates are snacking in vain. Even though there is a slight jump in metabolic rate after eating, there is no difference in overall metabolic rate over the course of the day. The metabolic rate over 24 hours is similar when identical food is eaten during few or many occasions.

Researchers also examined whether frequent eating causes people to eat fewer calories overall. One review found a slight benefit to appetite control when eating six meals per day compared to three meals daily, and eating less than three meals daily resulted in greater appetite.

Your Choice of Snack Matters!

Though research doesn't strongly support an ideal number of times to eat each day, there's no arguing that what you eat strongly affects your health. In one recent study, the choice of snack foods had not-so-surprising effects. Snacking on nuts, fruit, or 100% fruit juice was associated with a high-quality diet, but snacking on sweets and sugar-sweetened beverages was associated with poor diet quality. Eating vegetables between meals was associated with lower body mass index (BMI), and sweets consumption was associated with higher BMI.

When picking your between-meal nosh, ask yourself what you haven't eaten enough of today. For most people, that will be fruits and vegetables.

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