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## Eat Around the Clock

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Photography by: Pornchai Mittongtare



Three years ago, magazine editor Tracey Pepper zipped through four Pilates classes a week, pumped a little iron on the side, and hoofed it all over Manhattan. But something wasn't right. "I was in shape, but I was always dragging," she recalls. "Also, I'd be happy one minute, then crabby for no reason. My moods were all over the map."

A visit to a dietitian offered Pepper, 37, a prescription for her flagging energy and intermittent blues: Eat six times a day. "I've been eating five or six small meals every day now for three years, and it has changed my life," she says. "It takes discipline at first. But once you start feeling the results, you don't go back."

You're likely to see the results, too. "Grazing," as some people call this eating strategy, is far more effective for weight control than ordinary "deprivation diets," says mini-meal proponent Jorge Cruise, author of *The 3-Hour Diet*. Studies show that consuming small meals keeps your blood sugar on an even keel and ramps up your metabolism.

It's pure physiology, explains Seattle sports nutritionist Susan Kleiner, Ph.D., R.D., author of *Power Eating*. After a meal, food is broken down into sugar, which travels through the blood, providing energy to your entire body. "It takes two to three hours for the whole process—for blood sugar levels to go up and then back down again," says Kleiner.

### Little meals, big results

eating a large meal dumps huge amounts of fuel into your system at once—with the excess stored as fat—but frequent, small meals deliver manageable amounts of energy over the course of the day. Here's a quick look at the many health benefits of a six-a-day menu:

#### 1) Sustained energy

Food supplies the body with energy; the body then burns that energy to function. But it's easy to upset this delicate balance by skipping meals or waiting too long to eat. "When blood sugar levels are up, you feel energized. When they drop, energy levels plummet," says Kleiner. "So if you eat frequently to keep your blood sugar levels steady, you'll feel more energized all day long."

#### 2) Speedier metabolism

Your body is genetically programmed to conserve energy when food intake ceases. "Blood sugar fluxes every three hours, so if you don't eat something to raise the blood sugar, metabolic rate can slow down," says Dan Benardot, Ph.D., professor of nutrition, kinesiology, and health, and co-director of the Laboratory for Elite Athlete Performance at Georgia State University. Benardot has found that three-meal-a-day female athletes tend to have lower resting energy expenditures and higher body-fat percentages, which he suspects is due to the extended time between food intake.

#### 3) Easier weight loss

It's tough to lose weight when your metabolism is slowing down and your body is trying to hang on to every calorie. In addition, long gaps between eating lead to poor food choices, which can quickly turn weight loss into weight gain. "One of the stimulants to hunger is low blood sugar," he says. "If you let yourself get really hungry and find a bag of unpeeled carrots or a ready-to-eat pound cake in the refrigerator, which would you choose?"

#### 4) Mood stability

Science shows a strong connection between food and mood, and eating more often can actually alter the brain chemistry, says Kleiner. The key is to include complex carbohydrates like fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, all of which help maintain levels of serotonin, a mood-elevating chemical in the brain. "It's what anti-depressants are all about," says Kleiner. "These drugs work to elevate serotonin levels or at least keep them from dropping too low. The right foods accomplish the same thing."

#### 5) Reduced cholesterol

In one study at the University of Toronto, switching to multiple small meals reduced participants' total cholesterol levels by about 8 percent and LDL ("bad")

cholesterol levels by 12 percent. The meal schedule kept blood sugar more even, helping to eliminate insulin spikes that can stimulate cholesterol production, according to lead researcher David Jenkins, M.D. "Eating frequent small meals is a tremendous idea," he says, "though it's going to mean a major lifestyle change for some people."

### How to go small

Changing your eating habits is easier if you tailor your diet to suit your needs and preferences. "The goal is to eat every two to three hours," says Kleiner. "You can try six equal-sized small meals or three small meals with two or three snacks each day."

When meals are smaller, quality really counts. Make sure to include protein, high-fiber complex carbs, and healthy fats, says Kleiner. Protein and fiber help you feel full; complex carbs digest slowly without spiking blood sugar; and the fat, which also digests slowly, delivers a spurt of energy long after it's consumed.

You may need to redefine your sense of portion control so you don't take in more total calories each day. In restaurants, order a hearty appetizer as your main course, or before digging into your entree, reserve half of it to take home in a doggie bag.

A great snack is as simple as a handful of nuts and a few pieces of dried fruit. Spread a bit of almond butter on apple slices or whole-grain bread. Or wash down a hard-boiled egg with a glass of tomato juice garnished with a stick of celery. The body craves variety, says Kleiner, so mix things up a little.

To limit your portions, remind yourself how bloated you feel after overeating, advises Pepper. "Ask yourself before you fix your meal if you really want to down both halves of that double-decker sandwich and chips when you know you'll be nodding off at your desk a few hours later," she says.

It's also useful to devise a complete day's menu, and place the food in plastic containers you can take to work or have waiting for you when you get home.

The simplest way to turn three meals into six, says Benardot, is to divide your normal breakfast, lunch, and dinner in half, and then eat the second half three hours after you eat the first.

It may take some trial and error for a few days, but the rewards are substantial—and go far beyond vanity. Last spring, Kleiner shepherded a group of volunteers who tried the multiple-meal system. After a week, the participants stopped obsessing about their weight and began crowing about their well-being. "I kept hearing the same sentiments over and over: 'I have more energy. I feel so much better,'" she says.

For her part, Pepper swears she will never go back to three squares. "I sleep better. I don't have mood swings. My energy levels remain even throughout the day," she says. And she likes that she gets to eat more often. "You're not eating big quantities, but you get to snack six times a day. If you love food, that's a beautiful thing."

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