



THE PLAIN DEALER

NUTRI-NEWS Q&A

Counting calories and exercising key to losing weight

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Cinda Williams Chima
University of Akron

I am contemplating a weight-loss program. I was wondering what you think of eating six meals a day (approximately 200 to 300 calories per meal). I work odd hours, and this seems to work well with my schedule. I am looking to lose 30 to 40 pounds and wish to change my eating habits for a more healthy and practical diet. I have tried several other plans. The low-carb route works well in the short term, but I always end up feeling sick or tired all the time. My intentions are to also implement a workout program of weights and aerobic exercise.

Congratulations! Seeking a plan that works well with your current schedule and that incorporates both exercise and diet is a good first step. You should also discuss this with a doctor who is familiar with your history and overall health.

There are two questions to be answered about meal frequency and weight:

1. Does eating several small meals offer any metabolic advantage? In other words, do you burn more calories when you eat more often?
2. Will eating small meals more often be helpful in controlling hunger and staying with your meal plan?

The first question has been better studied. Meal frequency does not seem to make any difference in total calories burned during the day. There may, however, be health advantages to nibbling as opposed to feasting and fasting. Some studies have suggested that small, frequent meals may improve blood lipids and insulin levels.

The second question is more difficult to answer. There is some evidence that small frequent meals are associated with lower calorie intake in men. Eating regular meals - including breakfast - has resulted in decreased calorie intake and improved diet quality in some studies. But more research needs to be done.

Frankly, your success or failure with this approach is likely to rest in its implementation. The devil, as they say, is in the details. If you are eating six times a day, the choices you make and the precision of your calorie estimations are critical. If you plan for 300 calories and take in 450, you will be discouraged with the results. Here are some tips for achieving a healthy diet in six small meals.

Choose foods from the major food groups for all your meals.

Use the accompanying Web link for information about food groups and servings at various calorie levels.

If you choose traditional "snack" items such as cookies, candy and chips, the quality of your diet will suffer. After all, each small meal is contributing to your overall nutritional intake, and you can't afford to squander those calories.

Plan (and pack) ahead. Bring your meals with you when you are on the go, and there is less risk you'll "settle" for a poor choice.

Avoid situations where portion size is an issue or choices are overwhelming. In other words, don't attempt to choose your 200-calorie meal from a buffet line.

Portion-controlled and single-serving items can be helpful. Consider portion-controlled frozen entrees if you can afford them. Many of the Lean Cuisine or Healthy Choice entrees are 250 to 350 calories. Also think of fresh fruit, yogurt cups and canned soups. The shelf-stable foil packages of tuna and crab meat are light and portable. Mix into a bowl of salad greens and top with a low-fat raspberry or a balsamic vinaigrette.

You can prepare your own "portion-controlled" meals with a good food scale and some advance planning. Just be sure you follow good food-safety practices when you do.

Be wary of restaurant eating. Most restaurant meals deliver four to five times your calorie allotment. Ask questions about how foods are prepared. Many better restaurants will be willing to work with you in terms of substitutions, portion sizes and sauces.

Be aware of add-on calories. A tablespoon of mayonnaise or margarine can add 100 calories, a 50-percent surplus in a 200-calorie meal. And don't forget liquid calories: The calories you drink must be accounted for elsewhere.

Cinda Williams Chima is a registered dietitian on the faculty of University of Akron. Her column runs every other week. E-mail nutrition and weight-control questions, labeled "Nutri-News," to food@plaind.com

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