

## Put the Brakes on Nighttime Overeating

For many, nighttime is the right time to overeat. In America, we eat more during dinner than any other meal," says U.S. Department of Agriculture researcher Shanthy Bowman, PhD.

This is especially true for those of us who are overweight, according to a recent national USDA survey. It found that overweight adults tended to eat significantly more calories than normal-weight adults at dinnertime (while eating just a few more calories at breakfast and lunch).

### Facts about Evening Eating

Over the years, De Castro's research into meal sizes, meal patterns, and calorie distribution has turned up some other findings about evening eating:

- Meal size tends to increase over the day, with peaks at lunch and dinner. One study showed that participants ate 42% of their total daily calories during and after dinner.

- Our evening food intake tends to be relatively high in fat, compared to that at earlier meals.

- The longer the gap between dinner and the previous meal or snack, the larger the dinner. Interestingly, the gap between meals is a significant predictor of meal size for dinner only.

- People who eat lightly at night end up eating fewer calories and grams of fat overall than people who eat big dinners and nighttime snacks. According to the results of one study, people who had a light snack at night ate 9.3% fewer total calories and 10% less fat overall than those who ate larger nighttime snacks.

Obesity expert Edward Saltzman, MD, thinks the real problem is not so much that we burn fewer calories at night, but that nighttime eating tends to result from unhealthy meal patterns. The three types of meal-pattern problems Saltzman sees most often are:

- People don't eat during the day and then become ravenous and overeat at night. "If people wonder why they aren't hungry in the morning, it could be because they ate too much the night before," explains Saltzman, an energy metabolism scientist with the Jean Mayer USDA Human Nutrition Research Center on Aging at Tufts University.

- Food is used for all sorts of emotional reasons at the end of a workday (as a relaxant, as entertainment, as a distraction, etc.)

- Eating becomes associated with sedentary behavior, like watching television. In other words, we get into a pattern of eating while we watch TV or use a computer -- activities many of us tend to do in the evening.

### Why We Eat at Night

There are many reasons why so many of our total calories tend to be eaten during and after dinner, including physiological, emotional, cultural, and possibly evolutionary influences. They include:

It's part of our culture to eat a large dinner. It's also customary in many homes to enjoy a large dessert after dinner.

Some people, especially women, skip meals or undereat during the day. It can take quite a lot of food to satisfy the body's hunger after a day of undereating. Overeating at dinner or late at night may help to calm people from stresses that build during the day.

Studies show that meals eaten with others are, on average, 44% larger than meals eaten alone. Since dinner tends to be the meal that is more often shared, this may partially explain why it's also most likely to be the largest meal.

From an evolutionary perspective, nighttime used to represent the longest time period without food and activity. In modern times; however, artificial light allows people to remain awake and continue to eat, perhaps, contributing to obesity.

### Tips for Overcoming Nighttime Noshing

But even with all this working against us, experts say, it is possible to avoid nighttime overeating. If you're a nighttime nosher, here are some tips to help you kick the habit:

1. Get in the habit of enjoying a hot cup of decaffeinated tea at night. Tea comes in so many great flavors that you'll never be bored. In the warmer months, have a glass of iced tea instead.
2. Many people snack at night because they're bored. Keep your evenings interesting, and you'll find it easier to refrain from mindless snacking. Take a night class, plan an evening exercise session, find a new and interesting book or hobby, etc.