

Kids Gobbling Empty Calories

Teens are eating 150 more calories a day in snacks than they did two decades ago. And kids of all ages are munching on more of the richer goodies between meals than children did in the past. These latest findings have national nutritionists, weight-control experts and concerned parents wondering whether snacking has run amok in the USA, contributing to the rising obesity rates of children. Researchers at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill analyzed government data on the eating habits of more than 21,000 children, ages 2 to 18, from 1977 to the mid-1990s and found:

- Kids are consuming 25% of their daily calories between meals, compared with 18% in 1977. That means kids are eating about a meal's worth of calories from snacks.
- Teens have increased their munching from 1-1/2 snacks a day in 1977 to almost 2.
- Teens are getting about 610 calories a day from snacks, compared with about 460 calories a day in 1977.
- The snacks that kids are eating are more energy-dense; that is, richer foods packed with more sugar, fat and calories an ounce than snacks that kids ate 20 years ago. Kids today might be more likely to have French fries and a Coke for a snack, for instance, instead of a cookie and a glass of milk.

All of this is a "potential trigger for obesity," says Barry Popkin, professor of nutrition at the School of Public Health at UNC-Chapel Hill. In fact, childhood obesity is skyrocketing. About 20% to 25% are either overweight or at risk of becoming overweight, the government says.

Snacks can be an important part of a balanced diet, especially for young children, nutritionists say. But for many families, snacks have replaced the three square meals a day because of hectic after-school schedules, early school lunch hours and unpredictable dinner times, experts say.

People snack when they're rushed, bored, anxious. They nibble when they're watching TV and on the computer, while they're sitting at their desk, when they arrive home from school and have nothing to do. "Snacking has become an ingrained part of American culture," says Karen Miller-Kovach, chief scientist for Weight Watchers International. Snacking has become such a habit that some kids nibble around the clock. "Kids go to a soccer game for an hour, and someone brings a snack. They go to preschool for two hours, and 15 minutes of that is having a snack. We've ingrained the snacking habit into our children from a very, very young age. And in some ways, I think, we are doing them a disservice," Miller-Kovach says.

For many kids, "snacking has become a leisure activity," says Keith Ayoob, a pediatric nutritionist at Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York. "They are eating because it's there. "Snacking per se is fine," he says. "Unfortunately, the foods kids are eating today aren't delivering as much nutrition as they should, but they are packing a big punch when it comes to calories."

A 9-year-old patient recently told Ayoob that when he comes home from school, he eats a smorgasbord of snacks: chips, cookies, snack cakes, sodas. Another female patient told him she buys tasty treats on the walk home from school, and several teens told him they grab fast-food meals as snacks.



Portion distortion is a problem, says Ayoob, a spokesman for the American Dietetic Association. "A serving of soda used to be considered 6 ounces at 85 calories. Now it's 16 or 20 ounces at 250 calories. "I see teens who can polish off several of these sodas every day, and they are getting a lot of wasted calories with no real nutrition."

Miller-Kovach says young people today don't have an idea of portion sizes because they've only lived in the era of supersizing. "Kids used to eat a small bowl of cereal. Now it's a mixing bowl," she says. "As meals get bigger, so do snacks. What was previously considered a meal is now consumed as a snack."

None of this surprises teens, who say their peers are piling on the calories between meals.

Joel Holland, 16, of McLean, Va., says, "Teens are constantly snacking. I have one friend that every time I see him he's eating. His locker is loaded with soda, chips, cookies. I can't think of any guys who eat fruit, apples or oranges. They eat bags of chips."

By Nanci Hellmich, USA TODAY

<http://www.usatoday.com/news/health/2001-04-30-kids-snack.htm>

