

Snacking: Which Foods Are Healthy, Which Are Not

By Susan Woodward for MSN Health & Fitness, July 2005

The hunger pangs hit in the middle of the afternoon. You reach for raw vegetables and dip, congratulating yourself on your discipline. After all, you couldn't pick a healthier snack, right?

Well, that depends. What exactly are you dunking your carrot and celery sticks into?

Often a high-fat, high-sugar dressing or dip, according to registered dietician and weight-loss coach Julie Beyer. "Shift the recipe," she advises. "Dip your veggies in salsa instead. You can eat oodles of that and never have to think twice."

Many of the snacks we believe are good for us contain ingredients that are actually unhealthy, experts caution. Marketing is often to blame, explains Rick Hall, who teaches nutrition at Arizona State University. "They're packaged to look healthy, sometimes almost in a devious way, but it comes down to the consumer's lack of knowledge, too," Hall says.

To help raise your awareness, here are nine snacks we often misconstrue, along with some truly healthy alternatives.

1. Snack bars

Marketed as breakfast bars, granola bars, low-carb bars, etc. Frequently made from refined flours, most brands are also riddled with fat (hydrogenated oils) and sugar (in its many forms). For a real energy boost, look for snack bars made from complex carbohydrates, such as oats, and minimal or eliminated fat and sugar.

2. Bagels

"Refined, white carbs are not OK, despite what you might have been told about their fat-free properties," warns Hall. Oh, and one bagel is roughly equal to six slices of white bread. Go for wholegrain.

3. Pretzels

More refined carbohydrates. Pretzels have been stripped of fiber, that's why you eat and eat and eat them and never feel full, explains Beyer. Replace with low-sodium, wholegrain tortilla chips, especially brands that use additional wholesome ingredients, such as black beans.

4. Muffins

Surely a muffin is innocent, right? Only if you want to consume 600 to 900 calories every time you eat one. Margarine – lots of it – is what makes muffins moist. Reap the benefits of healthy fats by eating an avocado, or a handful of walnuts, which contain omega-3 oils.

5. Rice cakes

Yes, they're low in calories. That's because they're puffed rice – no vitamins or minerals, mostly air! You're much better off eating a bowl of fiber-rich brown or wild rice.

6. Beef jerky

Jerky contains as much salt as the Dead Sea. If you love it that much, make your own, or eat a soy substitute.

7. Popcorn

Again, almost always doused in unhealthy, hydrogenated oils. With their good-fat properties, olives are a wonderful alternative. Or try some protein-packed seeds and nuts.

8. Fruit

Of course, fruit is good for you, “but first you have to debug them of pesticides and germs,” Hall reminds consumers. To avoid eating risky chemicals and the germs passed on by dozens of human hands, always wash your fruit before you cut into it with your teeth or a knife. On the topic of fruit, Hall also recommends blueberries, raspberries and cherries. “They’re some of the most potent antioxidant foods you can get because of all the phytonutrients that give the fruit their color,” he says.

9. Fruit juice

Apparently manufacturers don’t think the naturally occurring sugars found in fruit are sweet enough for consumer taste buds, because they add a ton more refined sugar to most of their fruit juice products. “High fructose corn syrup” is one of the most common ways of labeling these sugar additives. Same goes for most of the “sports” drink products. Squeeze your own fruit and drink plain old water.

A good rule of thumb for ensuring you’re eating nourishing snacks instead of snacks with little or no nutritional value is to use snack time to get your daily dose of fruit and vegetables. “Go to the outskirts of the supermarket, and buy from the produce section,” counsels Hall. “Avoid processed foods, or if you do eat them, learn how to read the food labels.”