

Does Late Night Snacking Make You Fat?



An enduring belief that many people and unfortunately also many health professionals hold as gospel is that eating after a certain hour will lead directly to weight gain. It seems that the precise hour for the cutoff has been set at the magical time of 8pm. Finish whatever you're eating by 7.59pm and you're fine, but go one minute over and woe unto you! You can kiss any hopes and dreams of a slim waistline goodbye.

How this myth, and yes it is a myth, got started, I'm really not sure. My hunch is that it's based on the notion that your metabolism either severely slows down or comes to a complete halt after a certain hour of the day. Think of it as a brief state of hibernation. You know, like bears in the wild go through. The other possibility, and this one has a lot more credence to it than metabolic hibernation, is giving in to junk food cravings during the evening hours while parked in front of the TV.

Let's take a look at the metabolic slow down belief first.

During sleep, our bodies go through a repair process. Muscle cells are rebuilt and strengthened, and our brains are allowed to run free and decompress from the stress that is pent up during waking hours. And through all this, our hearts beat, our lungs expand and contract, and blood flows through our veins and arteries. The vital life processes forge on 24 hours a day 7 days a week until will expire our final breath of life. There is no stopping this process. It does eventually slow down over the years, but its rate stays fairly constant day and night. It just goes on and on like the Energizer Bunny until it doesn't. The same holds true for metabolism. That's

why it makes little sense that food you consume after a certain hour should magically get stored as fat – much like Cinderella’s coach turning into a pumpkin at midnight. The essential math of caloric accounting holds regardless of the time of day.

What you choose to eat during evening snacks is another story all together.

Eating a large tub of cookie dough ice cream or a pepperoni pizza isn’t going to do much for your weight loss hopes, regardless of when you stuff it into your mouth. Eating garbage at 10pm is just as bad as eating it at 10am! Images of overweight people in their pajamas with a huge spread of junk food in the glow of late night TV is probably where this myth got a lot of its strength from. There’s no disputing that eating like that will cause you to put on weight, but time of day has nothing to do with it. I like to refer to this impression as the “[Dagwood Effect](#).”

When should you have an evening snack and what should you eat?

Speaking from my own point of view and experience, I believe in listening to my what my body is trying to tell me. If I’m tired then I should consider getting some sleep if possible and if I’m hungry then I should eat something. Where most people tend to go astray, is satisfying their hunger with junk food. This is why I make sure that I have foods that are on my “allowed” list available to me whenever I feel hunger pangs coming on between meals. It also helps not to have the “temptation” foods around such as ice cream, pastries, candy, and chips and other packaged snack foods. Even bagels should be avoided when helping yourself to a late night snack.

As far as timing of evening snacks, I’ve found that it’s best for me to avoid eating within two hours of going to bed – regardless if bedtime is at 10pm or 1am. This is to prevent my sleep from being disturbed by the digestion process. Many

times I'll do some work on the computer or decide to read for a few hours before retiring. If my body is pestering me that it needs to be fed, then no problem. I'll have a light snack of some cold cuts and cheese or some pistachio nuts or just a cup of tea and a few strawberries. These are low carb snacks that don't sit heavy in my digestive track and give me that little extra energy boost that I need to go a few more hours at the end of my day with out expanding my mid-section or wrecking my eating regimen.