

Late-Night Eating

A lot of students are under the impression that eating late at night (i.e., after 8 p.m.) is “bad” and contributes to weight gain. After all, “you’re not burning those calories while you sleep, so anything you eat late at night gets directly stored as fat on you abs, butt, hips, and thighs.” This is NOT necessarily true!

Your body burns calories 24/7. (It’s true that you burn fewer calories when you’re sleeping than when you’re awake, but adequate sleep also helps your body’s biochemistry to maintain optimal weight and not gain weight.) It’s the total amount of calories you eat (vs. burn) in a given day that matters most, not the time of day you eat those calories. In other words, if you eat a dozen donuts (in addition to your usual daily food intake), it doesn’t matter if you eat them at 7:00 in the morning, 3:00 in the afternoon, or 10:00 at night. Any extra calories above what you need, consumed at ANY time of the day, may be stored as body fat.

You need to refuel at least every 4-5 hours. In college, you probably get up later and stay up much later than the average person with a 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. work schedule. If dinner was 6-8 p.m. and bedtime is not until 2 a.m. or later, you definitely need to eat again 4 hours or so after dinner (but not too close to bedtime). That late-night snack will not be considered excess food by your body—unless you eat too much over the course of the whole day.

To avoid the pitfalls of nighttime snacking, keep these tips in mind:

1. H.A.L.T. before you snack.

Before you decide to snack late at night, ask yourself “Am I physically **H**ungry?” If so, you should directly proceed to tip #2. On the other hand, if you just ate dinner and you are not physically hungry, ask yourself, “What’s really going on that’s making my desire to snack so high right now?” Is it simply out of **H**abit? Is it that you’re feeling **A**nxious, **A**ngry or overwhelmed, **L**onely or depressed, **T**ired or bored? If you eat for any of these non-hunger reasons, you’re likely eating more calories than your body needs.

2. Choose smart, and portion it out.

Unfortunately, in the wee hours of the morning, you are often at the mercy of vending machines, pizza delivery, or 24-hour convenience store snacks. Even though there are nutritious options available at LaVerde’s, we tend to make the worst choices when we are overtired and overly hungry. Many of these “convenience” snacks are high in fat and sugar and low in nutrition; munching on them all night can often contribute to feeling bad physically and emotionally.

Instead, think meal foods rather than snack foods. Your late-night eating should be more like a “midnight mini-meal” (with a definite start and finish), rather than endless grazing.

Another benefit of meal foods vs. traditional snack foods is that they tend to have some protein in them. Protein is much more satiating (or filling) than sugary or starchy foods, so you’ll be less likely to raid the kitchen or vending machine again an hour after eating them. Protein also does a better job of keeping you more alert, which makes it an ideal choice for late-night p-setting.

Try these midnight mini-meal ideas:

- A small box of whole grain cereal with fat free or 1% low-fat milk
- A carton of low-fat yogurt sprinkled with high-fiber cereal
- A small dish of low-fat cottage cheese and canned or fresh fruit
- One string cheese and a piece of fresh fruit or whole grain crackers
- A small cup of edamame (boiled soybeans)
- A handful or “snack pack” of your favorite nuts
- A small whole wheat pita spread with hummus
- Half a turkey sandwich
- A small 3-oz. can of tuna with 4-6 whole grain crackers
- Two rice cakes spread with natural peanut butter
- Apple slices or celery sticks with natural peanut butter
- Sports bar with 10+ grams of protein (avoid those with high amounts of saturated fat or hydrogenated vegetable oils)
- English muffin pizza with whole grain English muffin, canned tomato sauce and low-fat mozzarella cheese
- Small, low-fat frozen dinner (look for low sodium and whole grain options)
- Canned tomato or broth-based soup, or dehydrated bean soup
- A small tortilla filled with salsa and a little low-fat grated cheese and/or mashed beans

3. Stock up.

In the early part of the semester, you may have more time to grocery shop than around midterms and finals. In those first few grocery trips of the year, stock up on foods that won’t spoil quickly, such as nuts, soups, and frozen items.