



WELLNESS

# rumble in the dark

You may be toeing the healthy eating line during the day, but is the snacking monster inside you let loose as the sun sets?

SAVITA IYER-AHRESTANI lays out a pm food fact file

It's close to midnight, and all's quiet outside. You're on the couch with the TV on, your iPad on your lap, not paying particular attention to either screen because, for the past hour, all you can hear is the call of the tub of Häagen-Dazs sitting in the freezer. What do you end up doing?

- Turn everything off and go to bed.
- Turn everything off, drink a glass of water and go to bed.
- Turn everything off, open the freezer, scarf down the Häagen-Dazs and then go to bed.

If you've downed the tub, don't beat yourself up; you're hardly the first one unable to resist the lure of ice-cream (or other snacks, sweet or salty) at midnight. Even experts like Christine Avanti, celebrity nutritionist, chef and author of *Skinny Chicks Don't Eat Salad*, will speak of past guilt. "I used to snack from 3pm until

11pm every evening,” says Avanti, who’s worked with actors and musicians like Chelsea Handler, Audrina Patridge and, most recently, LeAnn Rimes. “And it’s because I wanted to figure out why I was doing it that I actually became a nutritionist.”

## NIGHT FEVER

Several things can lead to nighttime snacking, the simplest and most banal being sheer boredom. At the tail end of the day, when you’re relaxed with not much going on and probably up much later than you should be, it’s only natural to give in to the temptation of frozen dessert, potato chips, or even a bowl of leftover pasta that’s sitting in the fridge and awaiting deliverance. Krista Pal, an athletic and fit mother of two, who exercises every day and eats healthy, can certainly identify with that: “I very rarely eat late at night because I am hungry; I usually do so because I am bored or have a craving,” she says.

## IF THE MORNING’S GOOD

But beyond being bored, many of us really are hungry in the darker hours of the night, and those cravings are not only very real but they also get the better of us because we actually haven’t eaten enough during the day.

According to a recent study conducted by the Center for Research on Occupational and Environmental Toxicology at Oregon Health & Science University, the body’s internal clock—the circadian system—increases hunger and cravings for sweet, starchy and salty foods in the evenings on the day one skips a meal. Missing breakfast leads to a craving for a larger, higher-calorie meal right before bed, leading to weight gain. (Sumo wrestlers, for instance, skip breakfast to put on the pounds.)

“This happened to me until I learned that even skipping breakfast for just one day means you’ll be craving sugar or carbs for the next three days,” Avanti says.

## CARBO LOAD

Carbs, in fact, are the key. Unfortunately, they’ve become a dirty word in our lexicon today, with few grasping the nutritional value of dense, com-

## GOOD EATS

An ideal late-night snack should be eaten 60 to 90 minutes before you sleep and should not exceed 150 calories. Here’s what the experts recommend:

### MICROWAVE POPCORN

Light yet satisfying, “you can eat the whole bag if you want to, it’s perfectly fine,” says Lisa De Fazio, a registered dietitian in Los Angeles.

Skip the buttered version and opt for plain.

### A BOWL OF CEREAL WITH COLD MILK

“Whether it’s frosted or even your kid’s sugary cereal, it’s still better than a slice of cake or a bar of chocolate,”

De Fazio says.

### YOGURT WITH GRANOLA

It’s the perfect protein, fat and carb combo.

### A GLASS OF JUICE

More often than not, you’re just thirsty at night, not hungry, but if you want more than water, a cold glass of orange juice, cranberry juice or lemonade will do the trick,

De Fazio says.

### NUTS OR CHIPS

A handful or two of nuts or some baked tortilla chips will satisfy the salt cravers without doing a number on your weight.

### FRESH FRUIT WITH PEANUT OR ALMOND BUTTER

Again, the fat and carb combination is ideal for keeping your weight in check, says Avanti.

### FROZEN DESSERT

If you must have ice cream, go for sorbet instead. It’s far less fat- and sugar-laden but equally satisfying, Avanti suggests.

plex carbs; many believe they should limit carbs or, even worse, skip them altogether. But carbs are extremely important, says Los Angeles-based dietitian Lisa De Fazio. An insufficient carb intake at any meal will definitely send you on a late-night kitchen raid.

“You really don’t need to be eating late at night; you need to be sleeping.

But if you’ve eaten a dinner that consisted of only lean protein and greens, it’s normal that you’re going to be starving a couple of hours later,” she says. “Many people believe that they should avoid carbs—especially at night—but, eventually, it catches up with you. So if you want to avoid late-night eating, you must have carbs with your dinner. Maybe not a big bowl of pasta, but definitely a starchy vegetable like a potato, some quinoa, or sweet potato fries—in other words, a good-quality carb so you don’t end up wanting those cookies at 9pm.”

## THE RIGHT TIME

Still, eating after hours isn’t always bad for you. But making sure it isn’t detrimental depends on what you’re eating and when you’re eating it. Avanti, for example, is an advocate of eating every three to four hours—even until later in the night—because this helps maintain stable blood sugar levels during the day in order to avoid the night-time insulin spikes that cause both sugar and carb cravings. “If you eat dinner at 7pm you can snack later, but all meals and snacks must stabilise blood sugar,” she says. “So, let’s say your dinner is lean protein with a salad; you could also eat a healthy dessert to stabilise your blood sugar and give you your carbs, like a scoop of sorbet that is only 75 calories per serving, and have a late-night snack three hours later.” But, she cautions, the said snack should be a combination of protein and carbs or fat and carbs, like a slice of pumpernickel bread with a bit of smoked salmon, or some apple slices with almond butter. “Only then are you going to feel full, avoid the insulin spike and maintain a fit, lean body.” Give your body at least two to three hours to burn off the calories before hitting the bed.

However, if you have eaten a dinner with the right balance of carbs, protein and fat, you may not be hungry or in need of a sugar high at all. “The hypothalamus cannot differentiate between hunger and thirst,” Avanti says, “so many times when you think you’re hungry, you’re actually just thirsty.” Perhaps just a glass of water could do the trick. ■