

How to Deal with Common College Meal Planning Challenges

What challenges do students encounter to eating well in college? Which of the following are the most significant for you?

- **Busy schedule.** I don't have time for healthy meals and snacks.
- **Late night eating.** I study late and need the energy to keep going.
- **Too many choices.** It all looks so good; I want to eat everything.
- **Limited control over choices.** Only high fat, unhealthy foods are available.
- **Social drinking.** I drink when I'm with my friends and when I go out.
- **Emotional eating and not eating.** I eat when I'm stressed, procrastinating, lonely, bored, and/or depressed.



Busy Schedules. No Time.

College life is often much different than the routine you used to have. Previously, you may have eaten at regular meal times, slept at regular hours, and followed a fairly predictable routine. Now, class schedules change every quarter, all-nighters are all too frequent, and many students are juggling a heavy load of academics, work, family, friends, as well as extracurricular activities at school or in the community. It's no wonder that three balanced meals are a thing of the past. But, this departure can deplete your energy levels and your nutritional health. To avoid these problems, try the following:



1. Respect the importance of mealtimes, and give up grazing.

If you don't make it a point to sit down and eat, you'll find yourself eating a handful of chips here, a couple of cookies there, a few slices of pizza there.... Even if what you grab has a high nutritional value, grazing may not satisfy your hunger, and you are much more likely to overeat throughout the day without even realizing it.

2. Plan ahead, and schedule time to eat 3 meals and one to three snacks daily, preferably in a relaxed, comfortable environment.

Examples:

- Go grocery shopping once a week so that you have a variety of quick, healthy, and tasty foods available all the time.
- Get up 10 minutes earlier so you have time for a quick morning breakfast.
- Try not to schedule too many classes back-to-back so you have time for lunch.
- If you work, actually take your lunch break (vs. eating at your computer or desk).
- Before bed or in the morning, pack your lunch and snacks for the day.
- Cook in bulk on the weekends. Freeze leftovers in individual portions so you'll have quick, ready-made dinner meals at home.

If you're still not convinced you have the time, consider all the benefits of making the time:

- Active college students need to re-fuel (at least) every 4-5 waking hours. Blood glucose (or blood sugar) levels start to drop at about this point. When blood glucose levels drop, your energy, concentration, and mood drops as well.
- If you fuel your body regularly, you'll enjoy:
 - Better concentration in class. (You'll be less likely to fall asleep in class.)

- More energy, less fatigue.
 - Better mental and physical performance.
 - Stronger workouts, so you'll be able to build more muscle and burn more fat.
 - Faster metabolism.
 - Better mood.
 - Better portion control. (You'll be less likely to overeat later due to over-hungryness.)
-
- If you schedule the time to eat meals, you'll have more choices available. For example, if you schedule time to go to the dining halls or other on- or off-campus eateries, you'll have many more choices than what's available at vending machines or in the lab, office, or study lounge.
 - If you plan ahead and make home-prepared meals, you'll save money, have portion control, save time by avoiding long food lines, and have the option of eating in class, at work, or on the go.
 - If you allow yourself to eat slowly, at a table, in a relaxing environment, you'll be more likely to hear your hunger/fullness cues (and, therefore, you'll be less likely to overeat). NOTE: It takes 10-20 minutes for your brain to get the message from your stomach that you're full. If you inhale your food really fast, you're likely to consume excessive calories before you even realize you've had enough!
 - Further, if you allow yourself to eat slowly, at a table, in a relaxing environment, you'll digest your food better and you'll enjoy your food more.
 - Taking the time to actually enjoy the tastes and flavors of food also has the added benefit of reducing post-meal cravings. If you weren't really satisfied with what you just ate, you're much more likely to crave a little something sweet or salty afterwards.

Late Night Eating



Many students are under the impression that eating late at night (i.e. after 8 pm) is “bad” and means certain weight gain. This is NOT necessarily true!

Your body burns calories throughout the day. It’s true that you burn fewer calories when you’re sleeping than when you’re awake. BUT, 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 Krispy Creme donuts (in addition to your usual daily food intake), it doesn’t matter if you eat them at 7 in the morning, 3 in the afternoon, or 10 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 am to 5 pm work schedule. If dinner was at 6 pm and bed is not until 2:00 am, you probably need to eat again around 10 or 11. That late-night snack will not be stored as fat, unless you eat more than you need over the course of the whole day.

To avoid the pitfalls of late night snacking, keep these tips in mind...

1. HALT before you snack.

Before you decide to snack late at night, ask yourself “Am I physically Hungry?” 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 is really going on that is making my desire to snack so high right now?” Is it simply out of **H**abit? Is it that you’re feeling **A**nxious or over-whelmed, **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, and these calories may be stored as fat.

2. Chose smart, and portion it out.

Unfortunately, in the late hours of the night (or the wee hours of the morning), you are often at the mercy of vending machines or 24-hour convenience store snacks. Many (but not all) of these snacks are high in fat, sugar, and calories; and munching on them all night can often contribute to weight gain.

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 an endless eating frenzy.

Another benefit of meal foods vs. traditional snack foods is that they tend to have some protein in them. Protein is much more 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 study sessions.

Try these midnight mini meal ideas:

- One small box of whole grain cereal with fat free or 1% low fat milk
- One 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
- A small cup of edamame (boiled soybeans)
- One handful of your favorite nuts (peanuts, almonds, cashews, pistachios...)
- A small whole wheat pita spread with hummus
- ½ of a turkey sandwich
- A small 3oz. can of tuna with 4-6 low fat crackers
- 2 rice cakes spread with peanut butter
- Apple slices or celery sticks with peanut butter
- Sports bar with 10+ grams of protein (avoid those with high amounts of saturated fat or hydrogenated vegetable oils)
- English muffin pizza made with canned tomato sauce and low fat mozzarella cheese
- Low fat frozen dinner (< 300 calories)
- Canned tomato or broth-based soup, or dehydrated bean soup.
- A small tortilla filled with salsa and a little low fat grated cheese or mashed beans



If you decide to munch on more traditional snack foods, there are many lower fat, lower calorie snack options available. Whether or not you choose these lower fat choices, always remember to portion out your snack foods. Place one handful of chips on a paper plate, one serving of grapes in a coffee mug, or 2-3 cookies on a napkin. And, eat your snack slowly and in full awareness. If you mindlessly snack directly from the bag or box, you're much more likely to eat more than you otherwise would.

So Many Choices

Eating in the dining halls is like eating in an all-you-can-eat restaurant all the time. It offers good tasting foods you may never have had at home and in quantities you might never have seen before. There is an opportunity to make good choices, as well as an opportunity to make not-so-good choices. It's up to you what you'll choose to eat and how much you'll choose to eat. To avoid over-indulging, keep the following tips in mind.

1. Avoid arriving ravenously hungry.

If you are in the dining halls, everything will look so good, and you are more likely to over-stuff your tray and overeat. If you are at a restaurant, you will likely over-indulge in appetizers while you wait for your meal to come. Instead of falling prey to these situations, make sure you have a light snack before you go (e.g. a piece of fruit, a small carton of yogurt, a small handful of nuts, etc.).

2. Walk through the whole line first (to see what's available and decide what looks good), and then make one trip through.

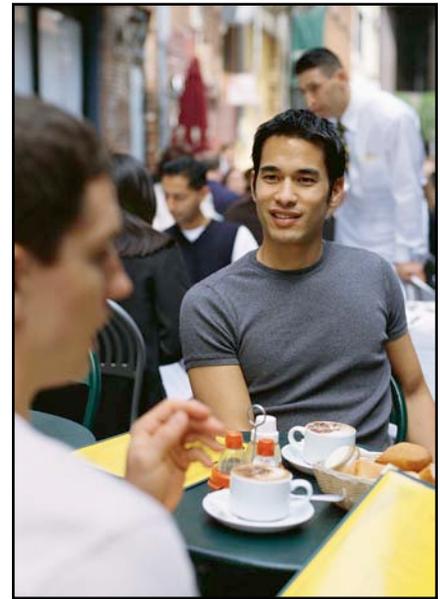
Avoid going back for seconds and thirds, unless you are genuinely still hungry. Remember, it takes 10-20 minutes for your brain to get the message from your stomach that you've had enough to eat. If you do arrive hungry, you may want to wait until after you finish your meal before you go to the dessert table. You'll be full by then, so what looks like a good dessert (or how much dessert you want to eat) may be different than when you went through the line hungry.

3. Commit to at least one serving of fruit and/or vegetable at breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

At the dining halls, this is easy. There is always fresh and canned fruit available, as well as a great salad bar and hot steamed vegetables. When eating out, you may need to make a special request for a side salad or cup of fruit, or you can bring your own piece of fruit or veggie sticks.

4. Remember MyPyramid, and balance your choices.

- If your options are pasta, potatoes, rice, and bread, choose one from this group, not all three. The foods you didn't choose today will most likely be offered again tomorrow (or soon thereafter) and you can choose them then.
- Add some protein. If you don't like the looks of the special meat, chicken, or fish entrees, add some tofu, beans, or cottage cheese to your salad or ask for a plain grilled chicken breast to go with your grain and/or vegetable dish.
- Opt for low fat condiments (like mustard, tomato sauce, seasoned vinegar, low fat salad dressing, and fat free cream cheese). Use high fat condiments (like mayo, gravy, creamy sauces, salad dressing, and cream cheese) sparingly.
- **Balance is key!** If you choose a high fat entrée, choose something light (like fruit) for dessert. If you choose a lighter entry (like grilled chicken breast salad with low fat dressing), enjoy a higher fat dessert. If you had dessert at lunch, skip it at dinner.



So Little Control

When you eat out or when you dine in a group living situation (like the residential halls, sorority/fraternity house, or co-op), you often lose control over what is available, how food is prepared, and how much is served. To take charge of the situation, keep the following tips in mind.

1. Choose restaurants that offer healthy fare, and avoid all-you-can eat places (if possible).

2. Cruise through the dining halls or peruse the menu carefully before making any selections. Or plan ahead by selecting healthier items from the dining services' online menu and nutrition information.

3. Ask questions, and request modifications or substitutions.

- Ask the waiter or server how items are prepared or served (i.e. Are the vegetables buttered? If so, can I get them steamed?)
- Request toast and baked potatoes "dry" or with spreads and toppings on the side.
- Ask for seasoned vinegar, lemon, salsa, plain nonfat yogurt, or low cal salad dressings.
- Ask them to "hold the mayo" and to put sauces, salad dressings, and other high fat extras "on the side." If you choose to use them, apply sparingly or dip your fork in the dressing/sauce to get a tiny flavor boost with each bite.
- Ask for a side green salad, steamed vegetable, or fruit cup in place of the cole slaw, potato salad, or fries that normally comes with it.

NOTE: If you live in a relatively small group living setting (like a sorority house), talk to the cook about possible recipe modifications and meal ideas.

4. When in doubt, go for plain food.

If you're not sure what ingredients are used in casseroles, stews, or other "mystery" mixed dishes, opt for the more basically prepared dishes, liked baked or broiled chicken.

5. Ask for smaller portions, or take steps to control portions on your own.

- Ask the server to give you smaller portions (e.g. 1 scoop vs. 2 scoops of rice; a small order of fries vs. the large that usually comes with the "value meal").
- Request a doggie bag immediately when your food arrives, and put half away before you start eating.
- When you're eating at home, put leftovers away before you start eating.
- Remove your plate as soon as you feel full to prevent picking at it.
- Ask to have the basket of bread or tortilla chips removed from the table or placed out of your reach.
- Share a large entree or dessert with someone.
- Eat slowly, put your fork down between bites and chew well.
- Drink a tall glass of water before you start eating and/or several glasses during your meal.

Social Eating and Drinking

Recreational Eating

Dining halls, food courts, campus eateries, coffee shops, and restaurants are not only places to eat, but they are places to hang out and socialize. Even when you've had enough to eat, it may be tough to just sit around a table and talk, without picking at the remaining food or going back for seconds and thirds in the dining halls. Sometimes just being with certain people can be a cue to eat.

1. Take deliberate steps to end your meal.

Brush your teeth, suck on a mint, chew gum, or drink a tall glass of water to cue yourself that the meal is over.

2. When you're done, get up and remove your plate, your tray, or yourself.

If you're at the dining halls, remove your tray and then return to your table with a glass of water to sip on while the socializing continues. If you're at a restaurant, ask the waiter to remove your plate promptly or give you a doggie bag. If you're at a party, position yourself away from the food as soon as you're done eating.

3. Create alternative activities.

Suggest to your eating buddies a new social activity or study break idea, like going for a "walk-and-talk," shooting some hoops, or playing cards.

Social Drinking

Alcohol contains calories—and lots of them! Drinking also triggers eating cues, regardless of whether you're hungry. And since your judgment is impaired and foods that are served with alcohol are usually not the most nutritious, your food choices while "under the influence" are often not the best. Follow these tips to drink safely and sensibly.

1. Pay attention to the Calories in alcohol

2. Never drink on an empty stomach.

Although you may want to save up your Calories for a night of drinking, this can be particularly dangerous. Drinking on an empty stomach will lead to faster absorption of the alcohol into your bloodstream and may lead to compromised safety and dangerous situations. It's helpful to eat something when you drink.

3. Drink slowly.

It takes an average of one to two hours to metabolize one beer, one 4 oz. glass of wine, or one shot of hard liquor.

Beverage	Calories
12 oz. beer	140-150
6 pack beer	840-900
12 oz. lite beer	95-110
5 oz. red wine	105
5 oz. white wine	100
1.5 oz. shot of liquor	100
4.5 oz. mixed drink	100-250
8 oz. blender drink	400-600

4. Alternate each beverage with water or seltzer.

Filling in with these fluids allows you to have something in your hand, while spacing out your alcohol intake.



5. Dilute mixers with water or seltzer. Choose low-sugar mixers.

It isn't only the Calories in alcohol. Blender drinks and drinks mixed with juice and soda add even more Calories, so mix with water or seltzer instead.

6. Know your limit; tolerance is an individual thing.

To enjoy the health and social benefits of alcohol (without any adverse consequences), it's recommended that women drink no more than one drink per day and men drink no more than two drinks per day. A drink is considered to be a 12 oz. can of beer, a 5 oz. glass of wine, or a 1.5 oz. shot of hard liquor. Unfortunately, you can't save up your daily moderate dose of alcohol for one night of heavy drinking on the weekend. There are no health benefits to this type of drinking, and in fact, it may undermine your health and fitness goals.

7. Recognize that your judgment is always off when you drink.

Emotional Eating and Non-Eating

Emotional Eating

Food often serves many other functions besides just satisfying hunger. Food may be used to celebrate, to relax, to cope with stress, depression, loneliness, or boredom, and to procrastinate from studying. All of us occasionally eat when we're not physically hungry. That's normal. But failure to manage non-hunger eating most of the time can lead to significant weight gain, emotional distress, and poor health.

1. Become aware of non-hunger cues that motivate you to eat.

- When the cue hits, delay eating for at least 10 minutes and distance yourself from food. This will give you time to determine what's really going on and whether you really want to eat (i.e. Are you really hungry? If not, what do you really need right now? Will food satisfy your need? If not, what could you do instead?).
- If you still want to eat after that period of time, decide how you will handle the situation. For instance, set out a realistic portion of food (such as a coffee mug full of pretzels instead of an entire box of cookies or crackers). Sit down at a table, and eat the food without distraction and without guilt. Enjoy it.

2. Have low calorie munchies on hand

- Examples: carrots, air popped popcorn, fresh fruit or veggies, frozen fruit bars, fudgsicles.
- These foods may help manage non-hunger eating. But, keep in mind that all foods have calories and regularly indulging in lower calorie choices will still add up.



3. If you're having a specific craving, identify what you really want and go get it.

- Low calorie munchies are great to have on hand. But, if you're really craving chocolate, then baby carrots most likely won't cut it. In fact, you'll probably wind up eating the entire bag of baby carrots plus some rice cakes and some fruit and still find yourself getting chocolate after all that! You'll save a lot of time, anguish, and calories, if you just identify what you really, really want and go out and enjoy one small serving.
- The key is portion control. If you keep an entire box of cookies or pint of ice cream on hand, it might be too easy to overindulge when a craving strikes. If this is the case, it might be better NOT to keep these foods on hand, but to go out to 31 flavors for one scoop of ice cream or Mrs. Fields for one cookie when a craving strikes.
- If portion control is not a problem for you, you might try keeping a bag of Hershey kisses or mini candy bars in your room (but out of sight) and eat one daily to satisfy your sweet tooth.

4. Create a list of at least 3 things you can do instead of eating when your non-hunger eating cue strikes (whether it be feeling bored, stressed, tired, lonely, or sad).

- Your list may include reading a favorite magazine, calling or emailing a friend, surfing the internet, taking a shower, painting your nails, doing a crossword puzzle, or playing a game.

Emotional Not-Eating

While some students eat more when they are under extreme emotional distress, others tend to eat less, either intentionally or unintentionally.

Intentionally following a rigid, restrictive diet may serve as a coping mechanism when life feels out-of-control and overwhelming, or it may offer false hope for improved self esteem for people who believe that they would be so much happier if they could just be thinner or more muscular.

Some students respond to distress by losing their appetite. In this case, it is important to be mindful of mealtimes and choose to eat regularly in order to stay healthy and maintain a healthy body weight. In times of extreme emotional distress it may also help to visit [CAPS](#) for additional support.