

PHOTOGRAPH BY ELIZABETH YOUNG



Eating for Energy

Foods to help you keep the pace at work.

YOU WOKE AT THE CRACK OF DAWN, ran five miles, ate a balanced breakfast, and popped a multi-vitamin. You filled your to-go cup with coffee and got to the office early to get a jumpstart on work. Yet by 11 o'clock you feel sluggish, your stomach is rumbling, and the lunch meeting you have scheduled is still hours away. So you down another cup or two of coffee or grab a handful of candy from the reception desk to tide you over. In one fell swoop another healthy start is derailed.

Energy levels can be controlled in a variety of ways. Maintaining a consistent sleep routine is one of the best ways.

Doing so keeps your circadian rhythms in sync. Circadian rhythms control body temperature, sleep and wake cycles, hormones, pain tolerance, and your cardiovascular system. When these rhythms are disrupted by inconsistent sleep habits, medications, or poor dietary choices—like five cups of coffee and a handful of candy—you end up feeling sluggish. Adhering to a regular schedule of sleep and wake times will result in increased energy stores. Then, when you feel yourself zoning out or unable to concentrate, it won't be for lack of adequate rest. That's when you can turn to food to give you a boost.

Studies have shown that the foods we eat, aside from providing necessary nutrients (or lack thereof) and calories, actually influence our mood . . . at least for a little while. Research by Dr. Judith Wurtman, PhD, a professor at MIT, shows that the foods we consume influence specific chemicals in our brain called “neurotransmitters.” Elevated levels of two of these—dopamine and norepinephrine—make us more alert, able to focus, and quicker to react. Conversely, an increased level of another neurotransmitter, serotonin, has a sedating effect. That’s why it is common for people to crave chocolate or devour a quart of Ben & Jerry’s when they feel stressed out. The serotonin surge produced by such a binge makes us feel relaxed and happy but bordering on drowsy. Hardly the effect you want when faced with a mountain of work.

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Use this knowledge to your advantage. With two more hours of work to get done before a lunch meeting, avoid that handful of candy. Wurtman’s research shows that high-carbohydrate foods like candy, processed cereals, grains, and pasta produce a calming effect as they raise the levels of serotonin in the brain. So, at the end of the day, if you are stressed out, anxious, or need to unwind, high carbohydrate snacks can be just the ticket. But, for our “need-a-boost” scenario, protein is king. In order for dopamine and norepinephrine to recharge us when we’re fading, we need to keep an assortment of protein-rich snacks on hand. Nuts, yogurt, hard-boiled eggs, cheese, or a protein shake satisfy hunger pangs and provide a lift.

When that lunch meeting finally rolls around, consider your afternoon schedule before ordering the risotto or linguini. Remember, a high-carbohydrate meal will leave you hankering for a siesta. But portion size should also be a consideration. Hefty restaurant helpings often teeter on the edge of the recommended daily allowance (RDA) for calories. When the body is busy processing a caloric overload, blood flow to the brain is diminished. You can forget about accomplishing much when that happens. Opt instead for high protein offerings like a tuna Niçoise salad, poached salmon, or a three-cheese omelet.

Food-induced moods last only a few hours, so it pays to plan accordingly. The formula to remember when it comes to food moods is Protein=Energy while Carbohydrates=Calm. One is better than the other depending on the given situation. Certainly every individual will react a bit differently, but once you understand how foods affect your mood, put that knowledge to work. Stock your desk drawer or office fridge with an assortment of snacks to help you meet head-on whatever the day throws your way.

Some protein choices are better than others—choose low fat versions of cottage cheese, yogurt, and milk. Avoid processed lunchmeats and hot dogs, which are loaded with sodium nitrate, a preservative used to retain color and keep bacterial growth in check, but which has also been linked to cancer. Fresh meats like pork, chicken, and fish can be prepared to your liking and are readily found free of preservatives, hormones, or chemicals. Simply slice them up and take them to work for snacking.

Smoothies are another great way to get protein along with an ample dose of vitamins, and can be prepared before work. Toss in a handful of organic frozen fruit, such as berries, peaches, mango, and melon. Blending frozen fruit into a smoothie gives it a slushy consistency without ice to dilute it, and remember to use lowfat protein-rich yogurt, soy, or almond milk. A spoonful or two of ground flax seed adds bulk along with a healthy dose of omega-3 fatty acids, for which your heart and brain will thank you. Pour the smoothie into an insulated cup and it will be cold when you are ready for a midmorning pick-me-up.

Diets, calorie counting, and fat fears aside, food is our friend. In addition to providing sustenance and nutrients, food choices have a profound affect our mood and energy level. Whether you choose a bowl of dark chocolate gelato or a tuna melt, love them both for the benefits they provide. One allows you to feel indulgent and content while the other makes you more alert and ready to plow through the day. Unless you’re allergic, neither should be off limits. So enjoy yourself and use food to your best advantage. ET

