



The Hoffman Centre for Integrative Medicine

Frequent Eating – the Dangers

John Douillard, DC

Patient Handout

Description

- Do you wake up and prepare six small healthy meals and pack them individually into Tupperware or plastic baggies? I don't! Neither did our ancestors and, contrary to what you may have been told, neither did the hunter gatherers. For them, it was feast or famine.
- *Our very presence as a species is due to the fact that humans were able to endure long periods of time without food.*
- What happened? With food on every corner, have we lost our ability to tolerate missing a meal? In this article I will share the risks and potential dangers of eating 6 meals a day and the amazing benefits of eating 3.
- Please read on as I ruffle some feathers in the grazing camp!

What Kind of Fuel is your Body Burning?

- When we talk about “burning fat,” what we are actually referring to is the process of using fat as our fuel and our source of energy. It's a chemical process, not just a metaphor for losing weight. But fat is only one kind of fuel that can be utilized by our bodies, and carbohydrates—or sugars—are another. When your body has both available, it will burn the sugars first and the fat second.

Fat Burning Benefits

- As it turns out, burning fat has a plethora of benefits beyond weight management. Fat is the most precious source of fuel for the body. It is the body's calm, non-emergency fuel. It burns slowly and steadily, providing energy for many hours straight. By contrast, sugar burns quickly. Sugar and carbohydrate fuels provide quick bursts of energy that often crash.
- Burning fat detoxifies us and neutralizes excess acids that build up from stress. The problem is that many of us have lost the ability to burn fat effectively and are chronically storing fat and gaining weight.

6 Meals a Day for Weight Loss and Consistent Energy?

- When the body is fed every 2-3 hours, it will burn fuel from those meals rather than its fat stores. So instead of burning stored fat between meals the way we were designed, the body enjoys having meals delivered every 2-3 hours. If the meals are small, frequent and healthy the body won't store any fat from those meals and, in theory, have energy all day and never gain weight.
- Here's the rub: when being fed every 2-3 hours the body will not be encouraged to burn any of its stored fat for energy, either. Why should it bother digging out the fat stores for energy when it is being spoon fed all day long? When you eat 3 meals a day and have ample time between meals, the body is forced to burn that stored fat.
- Once the fat is restored as an active fuel supply you will see ***better energy, more stable moods, greater mental clarity, better sleep, less cravings and of course, natural and permanent weight management***

A Study

- I performed a study based on my book *The 3-Season Diet* in 2000. We had the group eat 3 meals a day with no snacks and measured weight loss and a host of psychological factors. Within two weeks, their moods, cravings, sleep, exhaustion after work and fatigue were all significantly improved. They lost an average of 1.2 pounds per week for the 2 month study.

How to Burn Fat All Day Long

Eating breakfast, lunch and supper with no snacks in between will provide a natural fast in between meals that will encourage fat metabolism.

- When I was growing up, all the kids on my block had an early supper around 5:30pm. After supper, we played for a while and then came inside and went to bed. There were no bed time snacks and the kitchen closed at 6pm sharp. We would wake up and have breakfast around 7am and then walk 10 miles to school in the snow. Just kidding! But that was 13 hours straight with no food. We slept through the night fasting and broke the fast with *break-fast*. That means that every night, we reset fat metabolism. This allowed us to maintain normal blood sugar, stable moods and overall greater health than what is created by the cultural habits I see today.

What About “Healthy” Snacks?

- If you have a healthy snack, like a carrot, in between breakfast and lunch you will burn the carrot but you will not burn any stored fat between those two meals. If you don't snack between lunch and supper, your body will be forced to burn stored fat to get you to supper without a blood sugar crash. From supper to breakfast is a critical time to burn fat, lose weight, detox and reboot a stable nervous system to handle the stress of the next day.
- Many folks have a major blood sugar crash between 3 and 6pm. They crave chocolate, a nap, chips or coffee. This blood sugar crash can be balanced with a shift in how we eat. Take time to have a large relaxing breakfast; make sure that meal is big enough to get you to lunch without the need of a snack. Make lunch the main meal of the day and see how much food you then need to get to supper, without a snack. Make supper count and see if you can eat nothing after supper until bedtime. Wake up and break the fast with breakfast.

The Risk and Danger of Frequent Meals

- Experts touting six meals a day, or what some call the “3 hour diet,” say eating every 3 hours will rev up your metabolism, control blood sugar, decrease hunger and create weight loss. Fortunately or unfortunately, experts are having a hard time finding any studies to support these claims.

The Theory Behind 6 Meals a Day

- One of the main themes in support of eating six meals a day posits that it will keep the body's metabolism up, thus increasing thermogenesis (fat burning), resulting in weight loss. There are many studies disputing this notion. In 1997, the *British Journal of Medicine* did a thorough review of all such related studies and found no evidence that eating 6 meals a day increases metabolism, thermogenesis, or weight loss¹.
- One of the other arguments behind the 6 meal a day plan is that if you eat 6 small healthy meals a day, the appetite and hunger at each meal will be less. This may help some dieters control hunger and calorie intake.
- However, the American Dietetic Association (ADA) advises that the more frequently one eats when just slightly hungry, the higher the risk for over-eating, suggesting that this as an unreliable strategy.
- Finally, perhaps the Holy Grail of the 6-meals-a-day supporters is its effect on balancing blood sugar. If you open a medical text book and look up “hypoglycemia,” a condition that involves the blood sugar regularly crashing, you will see a recommendation to eat small meals throughout the day as a dietary medicine. It also suggests that once the blood

sugar is brought back into balance, one would return to eating 3 regular meals.

- America has been diagnosed with hypoglycemia and prescribed “6 meals a day” as a medicine. The problem is that we are not being told how to get off the medicine and return to the healthier 3-meals-a-day plan. Folks who have blood sugar issues tend to eat poor quality meals and snacks full of simple carbs, sugars, stimulants, processed fats and comfort foods.
- True, eating frequent small meals a day will curb the highs and lows of the blood sugar and help them feel more stable, *in the short term*. I have many patients who report that initially they feel great on the 6 meal a day plan. They started losing some weight, their anxiety levels, energy and cravings were improving. Then, within 6-9 months the results often slowed down. They soon started feeling hungry all the time, the weight came back on, and the anxiety and mood sensitivity were all of a sudden worse.

Food Dependency

- When you eat every 2-3 hours, your body becomes dependent on a constant supply of food. The body will lose its built-in ability to tolerate missing a meal, and the blood sugar will crash and often crash hard.
- In 2002, the New York Academy of Sciences published a report stating that all-day grazing can put you at risk for type 2 diabetes, heart disease and stroke. The risk increases when insulin spikes after eating foods that have high glycemic values. If you eat only three meals a day, (even high-glycemic ones), your insulin levels have time to even out, says Victor Zammit, head of cell biochemistry at Hannah Research Institute in Ayr, Scotland. Conversely, if you eat high glycemic foods between meals, your insulin levels stay dangerously high.

Transitioning from Many Small Meals to 3

- Most cultures around the world still practice 2 to 3 meals a day without snacking. For most westerners who have become accustomed to snacking, having three meals a day will be a transition. Our western diet is loaded with short chain carbs, sugars and fast burning processed foods. Give yourself some time to make this transition. You can even start with four meals to make it easier.
- Remember: we are making you into a good fat burner once again. This will balance your blood sugar and stave off a host of degenerative and inflammatory diseases.

Here are some tips to make the transition easier:

- Drink lots of water between each meal.
- When you eat: relax, dine and enjoy the meal before you.
- Start with four meals a day and work down to three.
- Make each meal count and try to make lunch the main meal of the day.
- Avoid late night meals.
- Eat whole foods rather than processed foods.¹

¹ Meal frequency and energy balance. Br J Nutr. 1997 Apr;77 Suppl 1:S57-70.