

[NOTE: Some sentiments contained within "What We're Reading" articles may not strictly conform with Simple Again's nutritional outlook. We read articles containing opposing information all the time and derive our nutritional philosophies from the latest science, the opinions of experts worldwide and our anecdotal experiences in the field. We keep an open mind and a strong affinity for fact-based evidence to help make the world of nutrition "Simple Again" for you.]

Why It's So Hard To Resist Late-Night Eating

If you're like most Americans, you crave a snack after dinner. For many people, an enjoyable snack in the late evening is a nice way to avoid going to bed hungry, and it also spreads our daily calories across more sittings.

But for many, late-night eating creates problems. It can be harder to lose weight when we eat closer to bedtime, especially when the foods we're drawn to are easy to overeat, like cookies, chips, ice cream, and other calorie-dense foods. Late-night eating can also contribute to acid reflux-related conditions, like GERD.

If you've tried unsuccessfully to cut back on late-night eating, you know how strong the pull can be. But why is it such a struggle to resist snacking, especially after having eaten what is for most of us our largest meal of the day? And how can we better control the urge?

Why Do I Crave a Late-Evening Snack?

Imagine it's 8:00 p.m. and you're ready to unwind. You worked hard all day, including trying to make healthful food choices in a world that doesn't make it easy: You skipped the free bagels in your office kitchen, knowing you'd regret it later, you declined dessert with your co-workers at lunch, and resisted seconds at dinner.

But now, at the end of the day, your willpower is running low. As you settle onto the couch and turn on the TV, the first images you see are of ice cream, potato chips, and cookies. Even though you ate at 6:30, you're seized by a craving for something sweet. Able to resist no longer, you grab a box of cookies or a bowl of ice cream.

As this example suggests, our self-control is often exhausted by the end of the day, and it's easier to give in to temptation when we're tired. We might also be snacking in the late evening to push away uncomfortable emotions. Maybe we're feeling stressed, lonely, or just bored, now that the busyness of the day is behind us. Eating can provide a welcome distraction from these feelings, as the brain's reward system is activated through the release of dopamine and our body's natural opioids. If we're in the habit of snacking at night, our brains will start to demand the reward they're accustomed to.

As important as these factors may be, the biggest driver of nighttime eating may be our internal clock. We have a circadian (24-hour) internal clock not only for our sleep/wake cycle, but also for hunger — with an average daily peak at 8:00 p.m. So even though the average American will have eaten dinner around 6:30, at 8:00 we may have more of an appetite than we've had all day. It's easy to understand why the average time for an evening snack is 8:20 p.m.

Why the peak so late in the day? If we finish dinner at 7:00 p.m. and won't eat again until breakfast at 7:00 a.m., that's half of a 24-hour day with no calories. Thus our bodies are stocking up for the nighttime fast. We can also thank (or not) our ancient ancestors and the genes we inherited from them — genes that compel us to eat calories at night, when they're stored more



efficiently, since food was not always so abundant as it is now. Too bad for us that this advantage now only helps us store excess nighttime food as fat around our midsections.

Not surprisingly, our circadian-based hunger is lowest in the morning, making it easy for many people to eat a tiny breakfast or skip it altogether.

How Can I Reduce My After-Dinner Eating?

Given the multiple factors that may drive our appetites after dinner, it's little wonder that we struggle to resist the pull of highly rewarding foods. Fortunately, several tools can help, drawn from the Think Act Be framework:

1. Minimize the availability of your most tempting and unhealthy snack foods.

This one should be no surprise. As much as we might like to rely on willpower, it's often no match for end-of-the-day cravings. But we can greatly increase our odds of avoiding problematic foods by keeping them out of the house. Harness motivation when it's high to set yourself up for success when motivation is low. That might mean throwing away your stash now, or donating it to the common area at work, and then not buying more.

2. Replace problem foods with better alternatives.

We can soften the feeling of missing out on our favorite snack foods by substituting more healthy options. It can be something very small, like a mint or a piece of good chocolate. Make sure it's prepared in advance so there's no additional obstacle to the better choice. We'll need to practice accepting that we probably won't get the same feeling as we would from eating a pint of Ben and Jerry's or half a box of cookies.

3. Mix up your routine.

If you're in the habit of eating late at night, there are probably specific cues that trigger your "time to eat" feeling. Maybe it's sitting down to catch up on Netflix or turning on ESPN. Like Pavlov's dogs, you've become conditioned to expect food in response to a situation in which you typically eat. If you vary your routine, you can break up some of the automatic behaviors that lead to late-night eating. For example, instead of eating cookies while doing your crossword puzzle, you could read a book and have a cup of tea. Over time, you'll develop new associations that serve you better. Brushing and flossing right after dinner may also be helpful — many of us don't want to snack after that, because it would mean having to brush and floss again. With careful planning, you can identify strategies that work for you.

4. Notice what your mind is telling you.

Most of the time, our eating habits are reinforced by what we tell ourselves. We might be giving ourselves permission by rationalizing: I ate pretty well all day — I deserve to treat myself. We might believe that we can't possibly be happy if we don't eat what we crave. Other examples: This craving will last forever unless I give in; If I don't satisfy this craving, I'll feel so uncomfortable I won't be able to stand it; I might as well give in now since I'm going to give in at some point; and perhaps most pernicious of all, It's only one night — tomorrow I'll do better. It can be hard at first to hear the thoughts that contribute to cravings. Once we're able to recognize them, we can start to identify how they lead us away from our goals, and how to replace them with more helpful thoughts.

5. Embrace the cravings.

We never have a chance to understand uncomfortable states like food cravings when we automatically try to get rid of them as quickly as possible. Maybe the cravings are trying to tell us something. There could be an emotion behind them that we're trying to avoid. Maybe we're lonely. Maybe we need to go to bed. The only way to know what's on the other side of the cravings is to allow ourselves to experience them. You can pause before yielding to the urge and explore the sensations of wanting. Feel them. Welcome them. Breathe with them. They won't hurt you. In the process, we'll probably discover that we can tolerate cravings better than we thought.

No matter how many tools we have in our tool box, chances are we'll never completely eliminate problematic late-night eating. But with practice, we can shift the odds in our favor so we're more satisfied with our food choices.

Learn more at simpleagain.com