



Could this be the most dangerous time of the day for weight loss-seekers? According to researchers for the New Atkins Lifestyle, it's the time when dieters are most at risk of ruining their healthy eating regime. Whether that's the case or not, learning how to manage when you're eating can be as important as what you're eating.

By Yi-Hwa Hanna

The folks over at The New Atkins Lifestyle certainly do know their stuff when it comes to dieters and their habits: After all, that's one of their main target markets, and with their low-carb, low sugar eating plan designed to help people slim down and keep the weight off, they're on an everlasting quest to try and understand why dieters are unable to stick to healthy eating habits. So they interviewed a large number of what they dubbed "failed slimmers" in the UAE; and what did they find? The majority of people—51 percent, to be precise—tended to break their diets mid-afternoon, compared to 18% in the morning, and 31% late at night. It makes sense: In the morning, if you have a good breakfast, or at night when you've realised how much you've consumed throughout the day, you can make more conscientious choices. But when you're run off your feet, or simply bored at your desk, it's all too easy to reach for an afternoon pick-me-up after your hastily-grabbed lunch, or a sweet treat with coffee with your colleagues.

In fact, more than 29 percent of the study participants blamed temptation from their friends, colleagues and family as one of the leading causes for their failure, citing emotional distress, hunger, and busy lifestyles as other reasons for falling into comfort eating. Personally, I will always maintain that commitment is an entirely personal thing—and that if you really want to lose weight, get fit, or achieve whatever goal you're seeking, the real key is in your own mind. Only if you are truly committed from the inside out can you learn to silence the naysayers trying to tempt you into sabotaging your efforts, whether it's meant intentionally or not. But that's easier said than done, and even those of us with a will of steel can be susceptible to peer pressure, or the allure of temptation that comes from mere exposure. I don't keep "naughty" snacks in the house, for instance, because I know that if I see them, I'll be more likely to eat them. But when I'm at work, walking past the

tray of almond croissants en-route to the barista each day, it's hard to ignore the call that can come from that repetitive exposure, like a foodie version of Chinese water torture.

"[In our efforts to] discover why people have failed at dieting in the past, one of the things we were keen to establish was a pattern," says Atkins nutritionist Linda O'Byrne. "So we asked people if they could recall the time of day when they had previously ditched their diet. We soon discovered that mid-afternoon, more specifically between 3:30pm and 4pm, was the more precarious time for the majority of slimmers.

We were then able to work out, via our responses, the mean time of 'failure', and it came up as precisely 3:33pm," Linda continued, explaining: "This is the time when most dieters are susceptible to failure, because of a number of different factors. Namely, a dip in energy mid-afternoon and the use of food as an emotional clutch, which could be down to either stress, boredom, or the many other ranges of emotion that we go through on any given day," she says.

So, is taking into account what time you're having meals actually important, if you're trying to lose weight, build 'gains', and so on and so forth?

Yes, but not necessarily for the first reasons you'd think: Rather than being about what you are eating at certain times of the day going straight to your hips, the timing factor is more about how that can affect your metabolism, mental state, and your and mind's ability to make better choices. After all, while a calorie is still a calorie, like romance, discount shopping and asking your boss for a raise, timing can make all the difference. It's an extremely complex system, the science of weight loss versus nutrition, and experts need to take into consideration everything from your metabolism

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Scale Down

and hormone levels, to the neurotransmitters in your brain and even your emotional state, which can all have an effect on your appetite and how effectively your body decides to use the energy that it receives from food. “The actual science behind weight loss is proving that it’s the total calories consumed per day versus total calories burned per day, which is biggest factor when it comes to weight loss. So in theory, it shouldn’t affect you, if you only had one meal a day. However, timing is a hugely important factor, not just in the science of losing weight, but more in terms of our overall wellbeing and how it affects our neurotransmitters and hormones,” says Rob Donker, a nutritionist and personal trainer. Rob continues: “The reason we get hunger pangs and rushes of wanting to eat anything and everything in sight is due to fluctuations in blood sugar levels. If you don’t eat frequently, they’ll dip. While that’s not detrimental for weight and fat loss, it *is* detrimental for our state of mind and having that kind of epic craving that you can sometimes get if you haven’t eaten for around 8-9 hours. So the timing issue is more to do with affecting our state of mind and blood sugar levels than the actual fat loss itself.”

Don’t Go Hungry

To ensure that your body doesn’t wind up in that kind of state, you have to make sure that you actually are eating, and regularly, starting with breakfast. Experts recommend having breakfast within an hour of waking up, along with some fluids like water (NB: If you’re dehydrated, your body can think that you’re hungry when in fact, all it really needs is a tall glass of H₂O), and also kickstart your metabolism. Doing this tells your body that it doesn’t need to conserve and hold on to its energy because it’s getting some calories in, so it may as

well use what it’s got. Think of it as a very efficient saver that likes to hoard its stash of calories for a rainy day. If you’re someone who struggles to eat in the mornings, don’t fret: Even having a drink of water can help. Just try not to wait too long. If you like to wake up and work out first thing in the A.M., grab a drink upon waking, then eat as soon as you can after your workout. “Fasted cardio is a popular buzzword these days, but if you’re running something like 10km or 15km, this could

actually be detrimental to your tissue and your muscle gain. If you’re just doing something like 20 minutes on a stepper though, it’s fine. Fasted cardio is a personal preference: There are no studies that say it’s better than ‘fed cardio’, but some people feel better by doing it this way, and if that’s the case and it’s not too extreme, then so be it,” Rob says. Another popular idea is that of at least planning to eat your carbohydrates at specific times: “I wouldn’t say that’s essential for the general population, but if you are on a weight loss journey, it could be beneficial to carb-load around your workouts. If you have more carbs in your meals before and after your exercise, you’ll have sufficient energy beforehand, and afterwards, it will feed your cells with nutrients, and bring your insulin levels back up, letting your muscles take in the benefits more. It won’t make a huge difference, but staggering your carb intake like this could work as it’s a slightly more efficient way for your body to utilise them,” Rob says. As a general rule, eating frequently—so, not going for more than around 3 hours between meals, or at least without having a (protein-packed!) snack—will help to

keep your blood sugar levels balanced throughout the day, which helps us avoid crazy dips that lead to “bad” cravings and keep the metabolism boosted.

If the only time you can work out is in the evening, Rob also advises not skipping dinner, even if it’s late. “Personally, I wouldn’t tell clients that they shouldn’t eat a big dinner if they didn’t have time to eat properly that day. It’s total calories consumed, after all, and is more about the frequency than the timing, *per se*. If you’ve grazed and snacked

as does Ross Hanrahan, a nutritionist and founder of FitLife DXB. “Between 1pm and 4pm, people get what is called a post-prandial dip, which is basically the human secondary sleep gate. Generally, we sleep at night for eight hours, but if you look at every other creature on the planet, they nap during the day, and that’s our time to naturally want to do that. Because we have a lifestyle where we work through the afternoon and don’t have time off to do that (unless you live somewhere

“If you feel like you could still be eating like this in three years time, you’re in the right direction”

throughout the day, and you’re below your required intake, then I’d suggest you eat a meal for dinner to make up that macronutrient requirement for the day. Especially if you’ve done cardio or resistance-based exercise, you’ll need it; and your metabolism will stay at a stronger rate for 5-8 hours after your training, so it’ll be elevated anyway. It’s not something to worry about—having dinner late if you don’t have another option—especially if you’re an active person. I’d hate for someone to do a HIIT workout at 7pm then feel like they can’t eat. This would eat away at their muscle tissue,” Rob says. More importantly than the specific hour of the clock, it’s planning our meals around our workouts that is more effective, since after our workouts, our metabolism is fired up to burn more, and our cells are most ready to intake nutrients from food. Outside of spreading your calorie intake throughout the day to keep blood sugar levels even (and avoiding turning to sugary snacks as a fix when you do have a dip in energy levels), Atkins nutritionist Linda recommends making sure you’re eating the right kind of lunch, one that’s high in protein and complex carbs,

like Spain, anyway!), you have to counteract it. Staying hydrated, for instance, will help keep you alert—your blood flows a lot better when you’re properly hydrated—and ensuring that you’re not having foods with a high glycemic index with simple sugars. You need a meal with complex carbohydrates and lean proteins with vegetables in it, help to fuel you throughout the rest of the afternoon and into the evening,” Ross says.

Ultimately, everyone’s lifestyle and individual schedule is a little different, so the exact triggers that can cause us to fail in our efforts to lose weight sustainably will differ, be that a specific time of day or issue of practicality or convenience. One thing that experts agree could be the key to not only losing weight more effortlessly, but keeping it off for life, is finding what works for you, and learning to eat smarter, rather than simply eating less. “The main thing is to focus on what works for you and what feels sustainable,” Rob says. “If you feel like you couldn’t carry on with the same time you’re doing now after another two months, then it’s probably too extreme. If you feel like you could do the same diet in three years time, then you’re in the right direction.” ■