

Lifestyle

Have a break, skip the Kit Kat: How to stop snacking in the office

Find yourself reaching for a kueh or two every afternoon in the office? You might want to put these down. CNA Lifestyle lists 6 scenarios that make you gain weight – and how to sidestep them.



(Photo: Unsplash/raw pixel)

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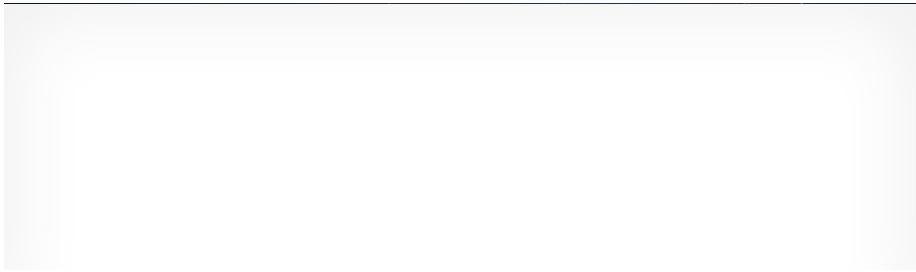


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SINGAPORE: It's 4pm and like clockwork, you're heading towards the pantry to rummage through the biscuit tin, or opening the fridge door to check its contents. Every single day.

When you snack frequently and around the same time every day, it creates a habit, said Jaclyn Reutens, dietitian and founder of Aptima Nutrition & Sports Consultants. "Your body sees the snacking routine as a norm."

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But why are you most vulnerable in the afternoon? You’ve gone a while without food, that’s why.

“The length of time between lunch and dinner can be anywhere between four and seven hours, whereas our stomach takes two to four hours to empty,” said Dr Audrey Tan, senior consultant in the National Healthcare Group’s (NHG) Population Health department.

This also explains why afternoons are when you find yourself stifling yawns and reaching for a cup of coffee – and maybe a kueh or two. It’s the fatigue and low blood sugar level caused by a near-empty stomach egging you on, said Teresa Chua, a nutritionist and health promotion executive with the NHG.

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(File photo)

When that happens, you start to crave sugar and fat – both of which are high in energy. “Our body’s mechanism tends to favour the consumption of high-energy foods to store as fat. This is a mechanism that was extremely useful for our ancestors when food supply was scarce and unreliable,” said Ms Chua.

Furthermore, when consumed, these foods “trigger the pleasure centre in your brain, leaving you wanting to keep experiencing that over and over again, day after day,” said Ms Reutens.

HOW MANY EXTRA KILOS CAN SNACKING ADD ON?

An adult male needs only about 2,200 calories a day, while a grown female requires just 1,800 calories daily to function.

Now, consider this: One curry puff or a large croissant can add up to 400 calories to your diet – more than half of what you’ll need to consume per meal.



(Photo: Nisha Karyn)

Those potato or tortilla chips you're munching on while reading this? Each 80g bag is an extra 401 to 449 calories.

Ms Reuters estimated that most people consume about 200 to 300 calories per snack on average.

"If your snacks add up to more than 500 calories every day in excess of your calorie budget, you can gain between 0.5kg and 1kg a week," she said.

If you're watching your weight (and who isn't?), resist snacking completely, as long as you are eating three proper meals a day, said Ms Reuters.

But if you already have a habit of snacking, you may be more successful at replacing unhealthy snacks with healthier ones as opposed to avoiding snacks completely, said Dr Tan.

"Resisting snacks completely when you have been snacking regularly can backfire and cause your body to crave for more unhealthy food as a form of compensation for being good," she said.

"It is always more sustainable to make swaps than change your eating choices or patterns completely in the long term."

On the note of making sustainable changes, we got the experts to weigh in on some of the snacking hacks to help you sit out the afternoon munchies. Here's a look at the common office scenarios that tempt you to snack and how to sidestep them.

Scenario #1: You have a bag of potato chips.

Do this: Pour the chips out into a bowl instead of eating them straight from the bag.

Remember Pringles' slogan: Once you pop, you can't stop? Sorry Pringles, but you *can* stop. The key is to take control of the stress-induced mindless snacking by exercising portion control to avoid over-eating, said Ms Reuters.



(File photo)

Alternatively, buy single-serve bags. Having to open a second bag creates an additional barrier to snacking. “However, for sustainability, buying big packets of snacks is cheaper and more environmentally friendly than single-serving snacks,” said Ms Chua.

Scenario #2: Your colleague bought doughnuts and you had more than a few while catching up on the office gossip in the pantry.

Do this: Focus on what you’re eating.

Socialising is part of office life but chatting while eating can distract your mind. You end up not registering the food your body is consuming and you won't feel satisfied, said Dr Tan.



(Photo: Unsplash/Marisa Morton)

It's akin to mindless eating, said Ms Reutens. "The satiety feeling may not come and if it does, it will be much later." By then, you'd have consumed more calories than you expected.

Sitting away from the pantry can create the additional effort for you to walk there for food, and this makes it less likely for you to snack. Not having a constant visual reminder of the food you have in the pantry also reduces the urges, said Dr Tan.

Scenario #3: You're attending a course, and there are cupcakes and muffins offered during breaks.

Do this: Pop a breath mint before heading out for your break.

According to Ms Chua, the strong minty flavour doesn't go well with sugary baked treats, so you won't be tempted to eat them. "Additionally, waiting for the mint to completely dissolve in your mouth can delay your temptation to take the cake immediately. This gives you more time to assess if you really want to indulge in the treat," she said.



(Photo: Unsplash/Jeremy Dorrough)

But be aware that breath mints contain calories too. “Unless you choose the sugar-free ones, do watch the number of breath mints you are popping daily,” said Ms Chua. Still, the mints are a lower-calorie trade-off compared to sweet treats like doughnuts, cupcakes and muffins, she said.

Scenario #4: The boss has ordered takeout for lunch and it comes with soft drinks.

Do this: Pour the drink into a small cup.

You’ll end up drinking less of the soft drink than, say, using a coffee mug or drinking straight from the can, said Dr Tan. It’s the same trick you use for the potato chips; the less you see, the less you’ll consume. Just don’t go pouring yourself another cup, and keep the remainder of the can in the fridge, she said.



(Photo: Pixabay/Ratfink1973)

Another trick is to fill the cup with ice cubes before pouring in the drink; it looks full but actually contains less of the soft drink than you see. Yet another trick: “Have a cup of water next to your cup of soft drink. Alternate sips of soft drink with sips of water, said Ms Reutens.

Whenever possible, choose the “light”, “zero”, stevia or reduced-sugar versions of soft drinks to reduce your calorie consumption, said Dr Tan.

Scenario #5: There's a birthday celebration in the office and there's cake.

Do this: Scrape off the cream and icing.

This would make you ask for a fork and start scraping: For a six-inch rainbow cake, the cream and icing alone would contribute about 2,200 calories, which is approximately 50 per cent of the cake, said Ms Chua. “For a six-inch crepe cake, the cream would contribute about 1,600 calories, which is approximately 45 per cent of the cake.”



(Photo: Unsplash/Will Echols)

The cream and icing per cake slice can contain up to 100 calories with 5g to 8g of fat, and 6g to 8g of sugar, said Ms Reuters. And that's just your regular layered cakes; for "heavy" cakes like cheesecake or brownie, you can expect more fat in the actual cake than its icing or cream, she added. Here's a breakdown:

- 1 slice of cheesecake: 257 calories
- 1 slice of chocolate cake: 235 calories
- 1 slice sponge cake: 176 calories

If you are the office birthday IC, and someone's birthday is coming up, do everyone's waistline a favour by opting for cakes with little or no icing and cream. Choose spongy ones, like chiffon or sponge cakes, advised Ms Chua. "Watch out especially for butter, cheese, chocolate fudge and crepe cakes, as these are high in fat and rich in calories."

Scenario #6: You need a break or are feeling bored, and decide to surf for food porn.


Do this: Take a walk (just not to the pantry for snacks) or stretch yourself at your desk.

Seeing pictures of attractive and colourful food on your monitor can bring on the classic Pavlovian reaction: Your craving to eat unhealthy food is triggered.

"Also, it can make healthier food choices look less appealing and more challenging to pick healthier options, such as an apple over a molten lava chocolate fudge cake," said Dr Tan.

Instead of surfing the Internet, take a walk or stretch break every one to two hours, she suggested.

"It can be as simple as walking to the pantry to refill your cup with water, or standing up and stretching your hands up in the air. These can relieve the muscle tension from maintaining a fixed posture over a long period of time at your desk, and encourage blood circulation to your brain for an added energy boost."

 Alternatively, use the time to meet your daily fruit intake, said Ms Reutens. “Three in four Singaporeans do not meet their fruit intake. Why not use that time to eat an apple? It satisfies your hunger and is nutritious. Allow the healthier snacks once every two weeks in the pantry for variety.”

Source: CNA/bk

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