

# DINNER DIET RULES MADE TO BE BROKEN



There's no reason to starve yourself just because it's after six o'clock. In fact, outdated food edicts can sabotage your health and even your weight-loss efforts.

by A.J. Hanley

**BREAKFAST MAY BE TOUTED AS THE MOST IMPORTANT MEAL OF THE DAY**, but when you're trying to shed pounds, a healthy dinner is just as essential. In addition to rounding out your nutrient quota, it can promote good digestion, boost brain function and mood, and help you sleep better.

Unfortunately, when it comes to the p.m. repast, the diet police have issued many hard-and-fast decrees. And while each rule may stem from a kernel of truth (or at the very least, logic), this black-and-white thinking can actually backfire, leading to unnecessary discomfort, overeating and even binging.

We asked experts for the skinny on some common but misguided dinnertime tips—and how to get the most out of your evening meal.

**OLD-SCHOOL DIET ADVICE: DON'T EAT AFTER 5 P.M. (OR 6 OR 7).**

It's one of the canons of weight-loss law—that you burn up the food you eat earlier in the day, while late-night calories linger, gradually turning into fat. But fortunately for those of us who hit the Pilates studio after work or stay up late watching TV, calories can't tell time.

"Your body will metabolize food throughout the day and evening," says Rachel Dreibelbis, RDN, a nutritionist and certified health coach for Core Studios in Pawtucket, RI. Even if you eat after the "deadline," whenever that is.

That said, eating a large meal before bed can inhibit a restful night's sleep as our bodies work hard to digest the food, she says. In addition, "when we lie down, the sphincter valve that connects the esophagus to the stomach relaxes, washing acid up the esophagus and causing heartburn."

To ensure proper digestion and avoid

hunger pangs late at night, schedule a time to dine that works with your lifestyle. "If you do eat on the early, assess your hunger after dinner and if necessary, plan to have a small, portion-controlled snack about two hours before turning in," she says.

**OLD-SCHOOL DIET ADVICE: CHOOSE WINE OR YOUR WAISTLINE.**

Many weight-loss plans have a zero-tolerance policy when it comes to alcohol. But a tippie can be included in a healthful diet—and may even be

advantageous when it comes to maintaining your weight. A 2012 Arizona State University study suggests that the resveratrol in red wine can suppress appetite. And in a 2010 study published in the *Archives of Internal Medicine*, Harvard researchers found that women who consumed two glasses of red wine per day were 70 percent less likely to be obese than teetotalers.

Still, there are health consequences to drinking alcohol, plus those liquid calories add up: A five-ounce glass of wine clocks in at around 150 calories, while a 1.5-ounce shot of vodka or 12 ounces of light beer

has 100. "Be conscious to balance the calories throughout your day," says Dreibelbis. Limit yourself to just one drink, and opt for lower-calorie beverages like light beer or dry wine. "Sip it before dinner, then stick with sparkling water during the meal," she says. If you're inclined, allow yourself to have a second drink after dinner.

Struggle with portion control when it's cocktail time? Consider the size and shape of your glass. In a 2013 study from Iowa State and Cornell universities, people downed 12 percent more vino when it was poured into a wide glass rather than

## DINNER OF CHAMPIONS

Pressed for time? Fridge a bit empty? To get a healthy dinner on the table in minutes, breakfast may be the answer, says Bonnie Taub-Dix, MA, RDN, CDN a Woodmere, NY-based nutritionist and author of *Read It Before You Eat It: Taking You From Label to Table* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing, 2017). "Breakfast foods are easy to throw together, and they're generally lower in calories and less expensive than takeout." Here's how it's done:

**EGG-STRA CREDIT** "An omelet or frittata can become a warm home for veggies, a food group most of us don't seem to get enough of," says Taub-Dix. "Eggs are low in calories (around 70 apiece) and they provide an excellent source of high-quality protein (7 grams each)." Steamed broccoli or asparagus, sautéed mushrooms or peppers, or even a few dollops of salsa allow you to up your veggie total for the day.

**OUT OF THE BOX** "Fortified with essential nutrients like iron, many cereals can help you deliciously meet your daily needs," Taub-Dix says. "Look for one that has whole grains as the first ingredient and keep an eye on serving sizes. For additional fiber, sprinkle on chopped nuts and fresh or dried fruit."

**WAFFLE AROUND** "For a quick and comforting dinner, toast a whole-grain waffle and top with a tablespoon of almond butter and a sliced banana," she says. "Sprinkle with cinnamon, and you just may want to have it for breakfast, too!"

**TOAST WITH THE MOST** "Whole-grain toast can help satisfy hunger and perhaps even limit that temptation for a late-night snack," she says. Mash an avocado on top of a slice, then add a scrambled egg or a slice of melted cheese. The healthy fat in the avocado keeps you satisfied for longer, and the egg or cheese adds protein.



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a standard-size one. So save those those balloon goblets for sparkling water.

Another way to keep your pour under control is to go with a half-glass rule of thumb: A 2014 study in the *International Journal of Drug Policy* found that people who regularly filled their glasses halfway consumed 20 percent less wine than those who didn't.

**OLD-SCHOOL DIET ADVICE: EAT PASTA AND YOU'LL PILE ON THE POUNDS.**

"Yes, pasta can sabotage your eating plan if it's included too often and is of a serving size that can feed a small army," Dreibelbis says. "But your body needs

carbohydrates to efficiently burn fat, so there can be a place for it in a healthy diet."

If that cavatelli is calling your name, have it, but be mindful of how much you dish out. For the recommended two or three ounces of uncooked noodles per person, "refer to your fist," says Dreibelbis: One serving is about the size of your clenched hand. Skip the linguine and other noodles at restaurants, where servings tend to be massive. "Do your wallet and nutrition plan a favor, and opt to have pasta at home when you can be in control of portion size," she says. Up the nutrition profile by choosing whole wheat over regular pasta.

And of course, avoid high-calorie additions, like creamy sauces and rich toppings. "It may

not be the pasta, but the company it keeps," says Bonnie Taub-Dix, a Woodmere, NY-based nutritionist.

**OLD-SCHOOL DIET ADVICE: SWEAR OFF THE SWEETS.**

You can have your cake and eat it, too, albeit in moderation. A growing body of research shows that feeling deprived—even if you're consuming plenty of calories—can trigger overeating.

Dreibelbis advises listening to your body's signals and honoring your cravings in a sensible way. Budget about 150 to 200 calories for an indulgence—say, two squares of dark chocolate or one-half cup of (non-premium) ice cream. At a restaurant? "Sharing is a great way to navigate around dessert," says Dreibelbis, who recommends pairing a treat with a palate-cleansing cup of herbal tea or decaf coffee. "You have to sip it

slowly, which will allow time for your brain to signal fullness."

**OLD-SCHOOL DIET ADVICE: DON'T SPOIL YOUR APPETITE.**

Sorry, Mom, but between-meal eating isn't such a bad thing after all. "A healthy snack is a speedbump to a bigger dinner," Taub-Dix says. Because you're not ravenous when you sit down, you may make better food decisions and eat less, which will more than offset those calories.

Nosh on something small 30 to 60 minutes before dinner, Taub-Dix says, maybe an apple and a small handful of nuts, or a container of yogurt. Or curb overeating with a fiber- and water-rich appetizer. In 2007, researchers from Penn State found that preempting a meal with a broth-based soup can reduce overall calorie intake by 20 percent. In a 2004 study in the *Journal of the*



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*Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*, people who had a salad to start ate up to 12 percent less of their meal than those who didn't.

**OLD-SCHOOL DIET ADVICE: EXERCISE AND YOU CAN EAT WHATEVER YOU WANT.**

If you're under the impression that your regular morning jog or mat class gives you carte blanche to pig out, chew on this: In order to "make up" for an order of fries or a two-pack of Reese's Peanut Butter Cups, you may need to run three miles or swim laps for an hour. And at the risk of stating the obvious: "It takes more effort to burn calories than to put them back in," Dreibelbis says.

Also, be careful not to overestimate the calories you burned during your sweat session. Rather than using exercise as an excuse to eat with abandon, she says, "think of your workout as a bonus, and stick to your normal eating plan."

**OLD-SCHOOL DIET ADVICE: SKIP BREAKFAST AND LUNCH WHEN YOU WANT TO EAT A BIG DINNER.**

It seems natural to think we can "bank" calories by skipping meals. But as any "hangry" person knows, the fast-now-feast-later mentality makes it all too easy to blow through those "saved" calories at the dinner table—and beyond. In fact, a 2012 study from Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center found that women who missed meals dropped eight fewer pounds over the course of a year than those who ate three squares every day.

Eating one meal a day is hard on your body for a few reasons, according to Dreibelbis. "Taking in a large quantity of food at one sitting can cause a spike in blood sugar and make it harder for your body to process, causing bloating, indigestion and even GI upset." **PS**



**FOOD FOR THOUGHT**

An ancient practice rooted in Buddhist teachings, mindful eating has been shown to aid weight loss and help the weight-conscious steer clear of unhealthy choices. "Bringing your body and mind into harmony promotes well-being," says Laurie J. Cameron, author of *The Mindful Day: Practical Ways to Find Focus, Calm, and Joy from Morning to Evening* (National Geographic Partners, 2018). Read on for her tips for eating with intention and attention.

**EAT LIKE THE FRENCH.** "Adopt a European mentality, and set the scene for an enjoyable meal," Cameron says. Pull out the placemats or cloth napkins, put flowers or candles on the table, arrange your food on your plate and sit down.

**DITCH DISTRACTIONS.** Put aside your tablet and turn off the TV. "When your body is at the table eating, let your mind be there, too," she says.

**EXPRESS GRATITUDE.** "No matter what your traditions or beliefs are," says Cameron, "creating a sacred pause to say thanks before eating is a way to remember the interconnectedness of life—the planet, the farmers who grew the food, and the role you or someone else played in preparing it."

**CELEBRATE YOUR SENSES.** Observe the colors, textures and details of the food—for instance, the pale green of an avocado or the way a pomegranate seed bursts with juice in your mouth. Then take time to smell your food and focus on the flavors in your mouth and how they interact.

**SLOW YOUR ROLL.** It takes 20 minutes for your body to register fullness, so eat leisurely, putting down your fork between bites. A recent study in the *BMJ Open* found that people who ate slowly were 42 percent less likely to be obese.