

attack of the killer munchies

Do you snack by night? Four surefire ways to end P.M. pig-outs forever

BY HILLARY QUINN

It's eight o'clock. Dinner's gone, and I'm about to settle in for a relaxing evening of tube. But my mind isn't really on *Ally McBeal*. Instead, I'm thinking about what's in my kitchen. Some people channel-surf. I snack-surf, cruising from one edible to another till bedtime.

The binge starts innocently enough, with promises I fully intend to keep: "Okay, I'll have just one handful of tortilla chips, and maybe an orange." But the minute those are gone, I'm back . . . for a piece of cheese, then a Popsicle, a couple of crackers, a cookie or two.

Once I start, I can't stop—I often eat until my stomach is beyond full. It's only by practically starving the next day (plus doing extra workouts) that I manage not to gain too much weight. When people say I have a good body, I feel like an impostor, ashamed that I stuff my face when no one's around. And the worst part is this: By eating so diligently during the daylight hours, I just set myself up for another out-of-control evening.

How Night Binges Happen

My nocturnal snacking is a fairly simple case of TV-snack-itis. But for some people, nighttime eating is a way of life. Night-Eating Syndrome (NES), a cluster of symptoms that affects some 2 million Americans, seems to be related to a disruption of a person's circadian rhythm, or inner time clock (not unlike jet lag), which throws her eating off-schedule. According to Albert Stunkard, M.D., professor of psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania, people with NES: (1) rarely eat large amounts at one sitting; (2) tend to consume 50 percent or more of their day's calories after 7:00 P.M.;

(3) suffer from insomnia and, often, get up to eat during the night; (4) have no appetite in the morning.

NES, however, is a fairly severe problem, possibly stress-related, that hits a relatively small number of people. Plain old nighttime bingeing is a lot more common—and, fortunately, a lot easier to deal with.

Dumping the Junk-Food Habit

1. Get out of the house "Go to the movies or have tea with someone," says Tami J. Lyon, a registered dietitian in San Francisco, who believes that hanging out in front of the TV sucks people into overeating. "You might feel as though you've lost your down time, but you're breaking the habit of winding down by eating."

2. Stay home, but stay busy Can't stand the idea of going out? Night eaters should respect their need for relaxation, says Julie Kembel, M.S., education director for the Canyon Ranch Spa in Tucson, Arizona: "If evening eating helps you zone out," she says, "pick alternatives that do the same thing." Such as? "Computer games, crafts, solitaire, even paint-by-numbers kits." Whatever makes you feel calm, yet keeps you away from food.

3. Eat four dinners Break up your usual dinner into four portions, then consume the meal as a series of snacks, suggests Louis Aronne, M.D., director of the Comprehensive Weight Control Program at the New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center in New York City. "You'll probably consume less than you would if you ate a small dinner and then started snacking."



Tonight's menu: Buffy and a burrito

4. Don't hate yourself for being hungry Anxiety and guilt about eating can kick off a self-defeating cycle that just leads to more eating. Instead, allow yourself small amounts of the foods you consider "forbidden," says Karen Miller-Kovach, M.S., R.D., general manager of program development for Weight Watchers International. "Work around your evening appetite, rather than denying yourself or saying you're 'bad,'" she says.

Did any of this work for me? Well, not at first. I tried to relax with a paint-by-numbers kit (loved doing it, got hideous results). I turned my evening meal into a four-part snack jamboree. Nothing made much difference.

Then something strange happened: I got busy. Moving to a new apartment, plus some new work projects, took over my life for weeks, and I had no time to sit around and eat. I started to lose the weight I'd gained during my nightly feeding frenzies. That was motivation enough to keep me away from my old habits once life settled down.

It's been six weeks since I last stuffed myself in front of the TV. Now, I indulge in a nightly Tootsie Pop (dipping into "forbidden" foods turned out to be decent advice). Someday, an apple may be enough—and then I'll really feel free. ■

10 Incredibly Inedible Night Moves (1) Give yourself a manicure—the smell will kill your appetite (2) Organize old photos (3) Learn to knit—sounds dippy, but you could end up with a great scarf (4) Have sex (5) Play video games (6) Highlight your hair (7) Take a night class (8) Work out—you'll be too tired to eat (9) Dump the contents of your purse and clean it out (10) Walk the dog