

# Energy-Boosting Foods on a Budget

6 strategies for sustained energy

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Featuring [Debra Wein](#), President and founder of [Wellness Workdays](#), April 11, 2013

Time and money, as we all know, are limited resources. But the right fuel can help you make the most of them both. We're not only talking about which foods to eat, but how and when to eat them for the vitality you need to support a full life—without sapping the savings you need to support that life.

Consider the following acrostic [hate to give it away, but it spells **ENERGY**] to keep yourself feeling satiated and strong:

## 1. **Eat balanced meals that combine lean protein with complex carbohydrates.**

That's a recipe for slow and sustained energy absorption, as opposed to the energy spike and crash that comes from a sugar fix. Reaching for the candy bar for a pick-me-up is a kind of self-sabotage, explains [Debra Wein, president of Wellness Workdays, a Hingham, Mass.-based firm that provides corporate health programs.](#) After the initial surge of energy, blood sugar can drop to "levels that are likely lower than they were when you were tired and started needing energy. So it becomes an endless cycle," she says. Instead, opt for a mix of carbs, protein and fiber, which helps you feel full, by snacking on carrots and hummus or an apple and peanut butter. If you think of your meal like a matrix, you have complex carbs on one side and lean proteins on the other. Then match them up at will for countless options of balanced meals.

Amy Jamieson-Petonic, spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics and owner of the Cleveland-based company Nutrition Today, suggests some examples that pull it all together: a breakfast of slow-cooked oatmeal with 1 tablespoon of ground flaxseed, raisins and low-fat milk; tuna salad on 100-percent whole-grain bread for lunch with a cup of homemade vegetable soup, a piece of fruit and low-fat milk; and, for dinner, grilled salmon with dill, brown rice, steamed broccoli with garlic and low-fat milk. Jamieson-Petonic also directs wellness caching at the Cleveland Clinic's Wellness Institute, which suggests a range of recipes, from snacks to starters, on its website.

## 2. **Never, ever skip meals.**

In fact, three squares a day isn't going to cut it, says Dan Benardot, professor of nutrition at Georgia State University and author of "Advanced Sports Nutrition."

"How do you eat in such a way where you don't eat too much at any one time, and you eat enough to avoid low blood sugar as well?" he asks. To answer, he explains a bit about blood sugar: It peaks an hour after you eat and drops two hours after that. This means you should be eating something every few of your waking hours to regulate both energy and appetite, he says. Wait too long to eat, and a whole mess

of problems can ensue. "The primary fuel for the brain is blood sugar, so if blood sugar gets too low, you get mental fatigue, and mental fatigue makes you feel nasty and unpleasant." Beyond irritability, waiting too long between meals can lead to overeating as well as insulin production and damage to the hormone (called ghrelin) that controls appetite, Benardot says.

The way **Wein explains it**, if we want output, we need input. "We're expecting our bodies to perform from 6 a.m. often till 10, 11 o'clock at night ... We're not eating sometimes until 10 in the morning—after we dropped the kids off, got to work, had a chance to sit down," she says. "Your body is a machine. It runs on fuel and nutrients, so breakfast is break-fast, and that's the goal—to break the fast from overnight."

In addition to eating breakfast and snacking between meals, Benardot recommends an after-dinner snack, too. "There's this mythology that if you eat anything after dinner you'll get fat." In fact, not doing so can set one up for the blood-sugar dip you want to avoid, he says.

### **3. Eat whole, unprocessed foods.**

It's what you keep hearing for a reason. Load up on whole grains, fresh fruit and vegetables, and keep refined sugar and animal fat to a minimum for optimal health, Benardot says. Plus, "often the more refined, processed foods are more expensive," he says. "Keep it simple," with a piece of fruit or cheese. "It's very easy to satisfy your nutritional needs."

### **4. Remember to hydrate.**

Water comprises 70 percent of our bodies, says Jamieson-Petonic. "If we are dehydrated, this can zap our energy as well."

**Wein, who is also a personal trainer** and works with many athletes, says research has shown that athletes who are dehydrated perform at a lower intensity. "Most of us are on the run, drinking a ton of caffeine and sodas, which can be depleting of hydration, so taking in water on a regular basis can be a good way to just feel good throughout the day."

### **5. Get enough sleep.**

"If you are not getting enough sleep, it can really lessen energy levels," says Jamieson-Petonic, citing data that found that people who slept five hours or less were almost twice as likely to develop diabetes as those who slept seven hours a night.

### **6. You can do it.**

Convenience foods come with a cost. Save money by packing your lunch and skipping the fast food, **Wein says**. "If you buy it at a supermarket, you buy it when it's seasonal and buy local, you get more for your money."