Stop Overeating After Dark

By Cynthia BeMent – Oxygen Magazine

Do you stick with your nutrition plan by day only to turn into a nighttime nibbler at night? If you're on top of your eating plan by day but feel powerless against chocolate and chips by night, you're not alone. Here's how to eat right through the day and keep your diet on track into the evening.

Night Falls, So Does Your Diet

All of life's components converge at night – family and home responsibilities, stress from the day, after-work workouts, time constraints and lagging energy. "These factors can wear away your control and cause overeating," says Sandra Haber, PhD, a New York City psychologist who specializes in the treatment of emotional overeating. "We're tired at night and our usual defenses and modes of coping are not with us. We're in a more child-like, impulsive state." We're often looking for something to take the edge off a hard day. Emotions can run high and so can perceived hunger.

"When I get home after work, I have problems," says Diana Dyba, a teacher from Indiana. "I know that I eat badly to relieve stress and to gain some instant energy which I need to take on the workload waiting for me at my other job – homemaker." Dyba's weaknesses – chips, peanut butter and chocolate – derail her between four and six p.m.; right before dinner. Plus, when her husband works nights she has little energy for sidestepping snacks and preparing a healthy dinner for one.

Eat Right By Day

A common mistake dieters make is skimping on food early in the day. "Skipping breakfast and having a light lunch sets the stage for deprivation. It builds a caloric deficit that will leave your body wanting to make up for the calories at night," says Page Love, RD, LD and education coordinator at The Renfrew Center, a women's eating disorder treatment center. But it's not just eating regularly that's important; it's what you eat that counts.

"A lot of women who are dieting cut out carbs during the day – that's cutting out their energy foods," says Love. And a lack of energy is one of the key factors contributing to late night binging. "We need to work on our macronutrient distribution," says Love. "People are not getting adequate protein, fat and carbohydrates during the day."

Five Tips For Combating Nighttime Nibbling

Sandra Haber, PhD, offers these tips for staying in control of eating when the sun sets:

- ☛ Instead of fighting food, try substituting "better" foods. Replace chips with pretzels, ice cream with fruit, candy with Cheerios and plain cereals. Fill up with hot soup and plain popcorn.

- ☛ Divide your dinner into two sections and eat one section at dinnertime and one later in the evening.

- ☛ Keep your hands busy so they don't get into mischief. Polish your nails or take up a new hobby

- ☛ Begin a journal and use the evening time to write a few pages about your feelings.

- ☛ Dramatically change your routine: Try a hot bath with a glass of wine and some music instead of watching TV.

Understand What's Eating You

"If you keep trying to control your food intake, but cannot do it, your emotions may be playing a role," says Dr. Haber.

If you find yourself binging on snack foods or fast foods, eating a large amount of food quickly and/or eating secretly, you're an emotional eater. "Delay overeating for a few minutes and ask yourself 'what am I feeling?' Use this as an exercise to understand yourself, not just to stop overeating."