

From the Nutritionist

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The end of the school year tends to be a busy time for everyone. All too often, people put their health on the back burner when they feel like they don't have time to take care of themselves. Regular exercise, adequate sleep, and healthful eating habits tend to slide right when your body needs them the most. Skipping meals, eating junk food and loading up on caffeine may be habits you resort to when life is busy, but they won't give you the best fuel to get through the day. In order to optimize your energy to get through exams, papers, and everything else life brings, limit the junk food and energy drinks, and try these tips instead:

Eat breakfast — Yes, it really is the most important meal of the day. Breakfast supplies your body with energy it needs to start the day after a night without food. Even if you can't sit down to a big meal, aim to have something to eat within an hour of waking — like a banana, bagel, or granola bar. To really boost your energy, get a mix of carbohydrates and protein — top the banana with peanut butter, have an egg with the bagel, or choose a granola bar with good amounts of both carbs and protein.

Eat every 3-5 hours — This helps to keep your body fueled and your blood sugar stable so your brain can work at its best. Skipping meals makes it harder to focus on the task at hand and makes it more likely that you'll end up overly hungry and then overeat later. Also, very large meals may slow you down both physically and mentally, but small, frequent meals and snacks can help you feel more energized.

Stock up on healthy snacks — You'll be less likely to grab a candy bar or fast food if you plan ahead. Great choices for snacks include a balance of carbohydrate and protein — try apples with peanut butter, crackers with cheese, or granola with Greek yogurt.

Cut down on caffeine — Although many people turn to caffeine for a boost of energy, it can also cause a number of side effects, including increased heart rate, anxiety, feelings of stress, dehydration, stomach pain, and difficulty sleeping. Common sources of caffeine are coffee, tea, soda, energy drinks, and chocolate. Think about how much you are consuming and try to cut back if your intake is high.

Stay hydrated — Even mild dehydration can stress your entire body and impact academic performance, so be sure to drink plenty of water and non-caffeinated drinks.

Limit sugar — Simple sugars and refined carbohydrates can cause your blood sugar to fluctuate. You'll get energy initially, but you're likely to crash and end up more fatigued and craving more sweets. Choose more whole grains, fruits and vegetables for healthy sources of carbohydrate. If you do want something sweet, balance it with healthy foods to minimize blood sugar effects.

Eat as healthfully as you can — You may not have as much time for elaborate meals, but you can still choose foods from all of the food groups: whole grains, vegetables, fruit, low fat dairy and lean protein — and include some healthy fats for optimal brain function.

Andrea Hart, registered dietitian nutritionist and New York State-certified dietitian/nutritionist, is available for free, confidential, one-on-one counseling and as a speaker or facilitator for campus groups, panels or classes.

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