Eating for energy: how to make the most of your meals

As the days grow shorter and the winter nights grow longer, it becomes harder and harder to stay energized. But by charging up with healthy fuel, you can help your body and mind keep pace and maintain peak performance. Below are a few suggestions on how to eat your way to extra energy.

Eat breakfast. Your mother was right—breakfast is the most important meal of the day. Studies show that people who skip a morning meal often have trouble concentrating, feel fatigued and irritable. Bypassing breakfast to save calories is also a bad idea since you're likely to overcompensate at lunch and dinner. Avoid foods high in sugar, such as toaster treats and store-bought muffins, which instantly raise your blood sugar, and then cause it to drop. Instead, stick to a balanced meal that contains complex carbohydrates (whole-grain toast, cereal, etc.), protein (e.g., an egg, a slice of cheese or lean meat) and a serving of fruit or vegetables.

Snack well, snack often. Eating five or six smaller meals throughout the day ensures your blood glucose levels remain steady. It also helps avoid that shaky or headachy feeling that occurs when you deprive your body of food for too long. Keep healthy snacks like nuts, seeds, fruit, yogurt and veggie sticks on hand at work and at home. Steer clear of "empty" foods such as pastries, candy, pop and other processed munchies that are normally high in calories and low in nutritional value.

Don't overindulge. Loading up at lunchtime—especially with carbohydrates—will leave you craving a siesta. Stick with lots of vegetables, lean protein (beans, chicken, fish, etc.) and ease off the bread. Moving your carbohydrate consumption to dinner will also help you sleep better.

Avoid caffeine. Coffee or tea may give you the jolt you need to get up in the morning, but rely on it too much and it can actually have the reverse effect. More than three cups a day can create a jittery, then lethargic cycle and may also interfere with your quality of sleep.

Drink up. Drink plenty of water throughout the day to help stay alert, as fatigue is a sign of mild dehydration. Eight glasses is standard, but if you had a tough workout or overdid it on the caffeine, try to drink more. Thirst is one of the final cues of dehydration, so it's important to drink plenty of water before you start feeling thirsty.

Eat a balanced diet. While in-vogue diets claim a "quick fix" to weight loss and energy gain, most nutritional experts agree that over the long run, a balanced diet—one that's big on whole grain, unprocessed foods and includes the four major food groups—is the best way to maintain energy levels and a healthy weight (for more information, consult Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating.)

Pump up the iron. Sluggishness, especially in women, is often a sign of a low iron levels. Iron found in red meat is most easily absorbed by the body. Other options include: seafood (clams, in particular), spinach, fortified cereals, almonds, dried figs and legumes. These should be consumed with foods or drinks rich in vitamin C (e.g., orange or grapefruit juice) to maximize absorption of the iron. If you suspect your iron is low, or have noticed a drastic change in your energy level, consult your doctor.

As each day drags on, you may find it difficult to maintain the energy levels you once had. But with the suggestions outlined in this article, in combination with a regular diet and exercise schedule, you'll soon find that healthy energy levels aren't so far out of reach.