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BY TERRI D'ARRIGO

# Snack Attack

## Night-Eating Syndrome Is No Joke

**D**agwood Bumstead has his mountainous late-night sandwiches; *The Cosby Show*'s Cliff Huxtable liked to sneak into the kitchen for a surreptitious slice of pie. Even Snoopy, Charlie Brown's beloved beagle, occasionally scratches at his master's door in the dead of night, supper bowl clamped firmly in his jowls. The midnight snack seems to be an American institution.

But for some people, eating at night is anything but a laughing matter. The occasional small snack is to be expected, but if you're eating more than a fourth of your total daily food intake late at night or if you wake up at night to raid the fridge three times a week or more, you could have a condition called "night-eating syndrome."

Night-eating syndrome can be dangerous in two ways. First, it can wreak havoc on your weight-loss efforts. You don't burn many calories sleeping, and the extra calories you don't burn will cause weight gain. Studies show that people with diabetes who have night-eating syndrome are 2.5 times more likely to be obese than those who don't have the syndrome.

Nighttime eating can also cause very high blood glucose the following morning. In fact, night eaters are 2.5 times more likely to have two or more diabetes-related complications and twice as likely to have A1C measurements higher than the recommended 7 percent. (The A1C is a test that takes a snapshot of blood glucose control over 3 months.)



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If you have night-eating syndrome, it's important to get at the root causes, says Paul Ciechanowski, MD, MPH, associate professor in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Washington in Seattle. "Night-eating syndrome is often associated with emotional upset such as anger, sadness, or worry," he says. "During the day we get caught up in the structure of our lives. We work, get the kids to school, or run a

home. But at night, when it's quiet, there's less distraction from our feelings, and one way to regulate those feelings is through eating."

Fortunately, there are treatments for night-eating syndrome. One is cognitive behavioral therapy. "Cognitive behavioral therapy helps change your automatic thoughts," says Ciechanowski. "If you tend to think, 'I feel horrible,' or, 'My life is never going to get better,' it can help you change that pattern. It will also help you change your behavior and teach you new ways to cope with your feelings without turning to food."

Medication is another option, he says. If anxiety is causing insomnia or waking you up in the wee hours, your doctor can prescribe something to help you sleep. And some studies have shown that the antidepressant sertraline (Zoloft) may treat night-eating syndrome itself.

The main goal is to recognize and address the reasons you're eating at night, says Ciechanowski: "If you can treat the emotional symptoms, the need to regulate your feelings with food goes away."

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