

## Eating for energy

# Is there life after lunch?

Tired of the post-lunch drowsies? The fault, dear worker, may lie in your starches — or lack thereof. Nutritionists tell us that a true power lunch consists of food that will keep the gray matter in gear for the long afternoon. That means complex carbohydrates — what some used to refer to as starches.

Choose pasta, whole grain breads and cereals, and dried beans, food that breaks down quickly into what the brain is clamoring for: glucose. You can also get glucose from lean protein, but not as efficiently, since it takes longer to break down.

The trick is not to bathe the pasta or bread in rich sauces or butter. Fats take a long time to be digested, diverting blood from the brain to the digestive tract.

Trouble is, high-fat lunches are so accessible. Fast-food palaces seem to specialize in them: the traditional burger with special sauce, french fries, and shake are saturated with fat.

### What's a luncher to do?

First of all, warns the Nutrition Council's Maureen Fisher, don't skip lunch. Eat something, and try to make that something pack an energy payoff.

When eating out, head for a restaurant that offers real choices. Many have "heart healthy" selections included for today's nutritionally knowledgeable. Or seek out a deli-style eatery that typically offers leaner cuts of meat. At fast-food places, consider your choice carefully, as fish or chicken may not be the best option. Deep-fried, they may contain more fat than a plain hamburger or cheeseburger. At all costs, avoid the

saucy burgers, opt for plain baked potatoes rather than french-fried, and shake your head on shakes.

Bringing a lunch allows you more leeway. Ms. Fisher suggests



a lean meat sandwich on whole wheat bread, fruit, and juice.

Perhaps the best advice for a power lunch is to combine a wise menu with some exercise to clear the cobwebs and regain momentum.

### Caffeine: the culprit

Your afternoon's energy depletion may depend more on what you've imbibed before lunch: too much caffeine. Diann Rivkin, a dietitian and nutrition counselor in Cincinnati, says caffeine "plays havoc with the energy level since it causes a big drop when it wears off." She warns her clients to cut down, including caffeinated soft drinks and iced tea at lunch.

Dietitian Susan Riches explains that peak blood levels of the stimulant occur about one hour after consumption, with the effects tapering off in approximately three and one-half hours. "One cup, at the most two, of caffeinated coffee" is her prescription.

Caffeine can also stimulate hunger pangs by triggering the release of insulin, which causes blood sugar to drop.

Suggestions for cutting back on caffeine include mixing decaf with caffeinated coffee, gradually adding more decaf until your body is weaned. Ms. Fisher warns that going "cold turkey" could lead to withdrawal symptoms like headache, nausea, fatigue, and insomnia. Some former coffee habitues have found satisfying substitutes in other hot liquids, including salt-free bouillon, tomato or V-8 juice.

### Snack time

Even with the most complex carbohydrate lunch and restraint on caffeine, it's likely that the late afternoon stomach rumbles will still strike. Again, sound nutrition suggests you veer from the vending machine's high-fat chocolate bar, choosing instead fruit and juice. If the machine's pull is irresistible, try peanut butter crackers. They still contain fat, but less than the chocolate bar.

Ms. Rivkin suggests a bran muffin for a late afternoon snack, noting that its energy may carry you all the way through traffic until dinnertime.

And then you're on your own. ■