How Often Should I Eat? Are 6 Small Meals Better Than 2-3 Larger Ones?

Typical weight loss diet and diabetic diet plans call for someone to eat 5-6 small meals (3 meals plus 1-3 snacks) per day. Rationale for this eating pattern is that it will keep the metabolism “revved up”, keep the blood sugar level consistent and prevent hunger throughout the day. But does it really work that way?

This topic has been studied for many years, with inconsistent results that can be difficult to interpret. One study that was published in 2014 showed that eating breakfast and lunch (2 larger meals) rather than 6 smaller meals resulted in more health benefits. The subjects in the study were overweight adults with poorly controlled diabetes. They were asked to follow one of 2 calorie-restricted diets for 12 weeks. Both groups were instructed to eat the same amount of calories, but one group ate those calories in 2 meals (breakfast and lunch), while the other group ate those calories spread out among 6 small meals. Those that ate 2 meals per day lost more weight, had a greater decrease in the amount of fat in their livers, and had better fasting blood sugar levels. When subjects ate only 2 meals per day, they woke up with higher levels of the “I’m hungry” hormone, ghrelin, in their blood, which the researchers considered a positive thing, since it encouraged subjects to eat more at breakfast, which is correlated with better food choices/less over-eating later in the day, along with greater weight loss.

A different 2009 study didn’t show much difference between dietary patterns. In this study, overweight adults were assigned to very strict low-calorie diets that they followed for 8 weeks. Again, subjects ate the same amount of calories, but one group ate those calories in 3 meals per day, while the other group ate the same amount of calories in 3 meals plus 3 snacks. Both groups lost weight (about 4.7% of their overall bodyweight) and body fat; however, there were no significant differences between the 2 groups. In this study, the frequency of meals/snacks did not make appear to make a difference in the amount of weight/body fat lost or in blood levels of hunger/fullness hormones.

Bottom line: There isn’t enough evidence to prove that eating 6 times per day is healthier than eating 2-3 times per day – ultimately, the TIMING of your calories doesn’t matter nearly as much as the QUANTITY of calories you eat throughout a given day and the SPECIFIC FOODS you choose to eat. If you prefer small frequent meals and snacks, be conscious of portion-size (remembering that every time you eat is an opportunity to OVER-eat), and make sure you are eating a balanced amount of real food - whole grains, fruits, vegetables, lean proteins, low fat dairy and healthy fats. Far too often, when it comes to “snacks”or “mini meals”, people end up leaning on (and over-doing it) on processed, refined and sometimes sugary carbs and sweet beverages (like chips, crackers, with cheesy/creamy spreads and dips, cookies, muffins, biscuits, donuts, granola bars, Hot Pockets, frozen burritos, sugary smoothies/shakes, etc.). If you have trouble controlling portion sizes and/or don’t have the time prep/pack healthy balanced mini-meals and snacks on which to graze throughout the day, you may be better off eating 2-3 decent-sized meals – just make sure that those meals are balanced, including foods from each food group. Because both meal patterns can be healthy (2-3 large meals vs 3 small meals plus 2-3 snacks or “mini meals”) feel free to
experiment – see what works best for you – find out which pattern allows you to reach your nutrition/exercise/lifestyle goals feeling energized and satisfied, while meeting the demands of your schedule as well. For more information and tips about how to plan a healthy, nutritious meal pattern, or any other nutrition-related matter, be sure to set up a nutrition assessment with Campus Recreation’s registered dietitian nutritionist, Annie Bell. Appointments are individualized to address your needs, questions, and concerns and last about an hour – oh, and they’re free! Full instructions on how to register for your appointment are here: https://campusrec.utsa.edu/nutritionregistration

Sources:
http://journals.plos.org/plosgone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0174820