

# Coronavirus: How to stop overeating and avoid weight gain in self-quarantine

Snack and comfort food sales are soaring as people stay at home during the coronavirus crisis.



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**By A. Pawlowski**

Many Americans may find their bodies flabbier and less healthy when they finally emerge from the Great Quarantine of 2020.

And is it any surprise? Hello, pantry full of snacks and [comfort foods](#). Here's looking at you, refrigerator packed with meat, cheese and milk.

It's all so tempting during the [coronavirus crisis](#) as people stay at home – bored, anxious and stressed – and seek relief by eating all day.

By the middle of this month, popcorn sales rose almost 48%, pretzel sales were up 47% and potato chip sales rose 30% compared to the same period last year, [Bloomberg reported](#).

There's also surging demand for cookies, crackers, soup, macaroni and cheese, breakfast food, potatoes, and canned, dried and fresh meat.



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It didn't surprise Lisa Young, a registered dietitian in New York and author of "Finally Full, Finally Slim."

"When people are stressed, they tend to fall back on lazy patterns, letting the vigilance with the food go. And it's comfort food – it's feel-good food, it keeps them full," Young told TODAY.

"I think that in these times, it's not a time to diet and to make yourself crazy... but (social distancing) has now become a way of life and it's so important that we make our way of life healthy."

It's also not surprising that people are buying shelf-stable foods that don't require a lot of time to prepare, said Dr. Dariush Mozaffarian, dean of the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University in Boston.

Still, [food prepared outside the home is generally less healthy](#) than home-cooked meals, so he was optimistic the break from restaurant eating could be positive when it came to nutrition.

"We don't know, we'll have to see, but I'm hopeful that people will actually be healthier than they were before. They're not eating at (restaurants)," Mozaffarian said.



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## **Create structure**

People may be disoriented by their new reality of staying at home all the time, so the No. 1 most important thing is to set up a plan for the day, Young said.

“You don’t just want to nibble on seven mini-meals. You want to set structured meals for yourself,” she advised.

Set a time for eating breakfast, lunch and dinner. Limit any mindless snacking in between. Stick to a routine.

Take the time when you’d normally commute and do an online exercise class or take a walk. Any kind of morning exercise sets you up for good structure for the rest of the day, Young said.

## **Remember that a healthy diet is particularly important now**

This is a time when people truly should be supporting their [immune systems](#), Mozaffarian noted.

“There’s good evidence that healthy diets improve the immune system and so if you want to fight COVID-19, eating foods that are rich in vitamins and nutrients – especially many red and yellow and other colored fruits and vegetables – can help the immune system,” he said.

“We have to try to make ourselves healthier... COVID-19 is a reminder that healthy eating remains important.”



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## [Stock your pantry and fridge strategically](#)

Young advised buying healthy staples including:

- Frozen and canned vegetables
- Canned soups – as long as they’re the non-creamy and low-sodium variety, like a tomato-based soup, split pea or lentil
- Whole-wheat pasta
- Nuts
- Canned fish

Make your own comfort food by having whole -wheat pasta, red sauce and frozen vegetables, for example.

If you really want to have cookies in your pantry, stick to one type. Don’t buy seven varieties of cookies because you’ll end up eating more of each of them, Young cautioned.

## **Don't eat out of the bag**

Eating snacks straight out of the packaging is a recipe for overeating. You don't want to spend unlimited time with that giant open box of crackers from Costco.

Instead, try [portion control](#) to limit how much you're eating. It's easy to do at home where there's usually access to a food scale or measuring cups.

Take the food out of the bag and figure out exactly how much you want to eat. Then "you put it on a plate and you sit down and you enjoy it. You don't eat it standing while watching the latest news reports, stressed out," Young noted.



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## **Allow yourself one treat a day**

Young is a fan of what she calls the "80/20 rule," or eating well 80% of the time, and allowing yourself treats 20% of the time.

It's good to have something to look forward to, like air-popped popcorn, whole-grain pretzels or whole-grain crackers. She's even OK with the occasional small portion of ice cream or macaroni and cheese. Just focus on nutritious food the vast majority of the time and "sprinkle in" any less-healthy favorites.

## **Make "I want to be healthy" your goal and mantra**

This is a stressful time – don't make things worse by sitting on the couch and eating all day.

“You think you'll feel better after you eat, but then after you eat, you feel worse. It ends up being a totally vicious cycle,” Young said.

“You want to say: ‘I want to be healthy, that's my goal right now. I don't want to get this thing and I want to stay healthy.’”



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