

Night Eating Syndrome

Night eating syndrome (NES) is a condition where a person eats much of their daily intake of food at the end of the day or at night. This is not a normal eating pattern for most people. If you work overnight, please discuss your schedule of eating with your physician.

Diagnosing NES

NES affects 2 to 3 out of every 200 people in the United States. It is more common among people with insomnia, eating disorders and other psychiatric disorders.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) includes the following as part of NES:

- Having minimal appetite in the morning and strong urges to eat in the evening
- Eating over 25% of your daily calories after dinner or when waking up throughout the night
- Eating close to bedtime or overnight at least 2 times a week
- Believing that you cannot fall back to sleep without eating
- Pattern occurring at least for 3 months

If you have any questions, ask your care team.

You may also notice the following:

- Trouble falling asleep and staying asleep through the night (insomnia)
- Depressed mood that worsens in the evening hours

Symptoms of NES can cause a lot of distress or harm and impact quality of life. NES is a risk factor for an earlier onset of obesity. It is related to higher rates of depression and lower self-esteem. It can also be associated with an increased risk of diabetes and metabolic problems over time.

Help yourself curb night eating

If you are concerned with night eating there are different things you can do to help. Below are some helpful tips.

1. Follow a regular eating pattern

- Eat within 1 hour of waking up in the morning.
- Eat most of your calories for the day early.
- Plan for 3 regular meals and 2 to 3 planned snacks.

- Do not let more than 4 hours pass without eating.
- Plan for a gap between your last meal and your bedtime, set an alarm to “close the kitchen” and stick to it.

2. *Change your environment*

- Keep track of what you tend to eat in the evening and make the decision to keep those foods out of the house.
- Do not allow food in your bedroom or on the sofa.

3. *Improve your sleep habits*

- Set and keep a regular bedtime and wake time.
- Avoid caffeine, nicotine and alcohol at least 4 to 6 hours before bedtime.
- Do not use your bed for anything other than sleep or sex.
- Avoid napping during the day.
- Get regular exercise.
- Create a pre-sleep ritual to help you fall sleep.
- Avoid screen time in the hour before bed.
- Create a comfortable bedroom environment.

4. *Challenge the belief that you need to eat to go back to sleep*

- The next time you feel this way, try to fall back to sleep without eating.
- Create a bedtime routine that does not include food.

5. *Address mood symptoms, as needed*

- Seek medical help with any symptoms of depression.
- Start a journal where you write down your thoughts.

For more help

If you are having trouble stopping NES or changing your eating habits, talk with your physician about these options:

- Sleep study to rule out a sleep disorder (such as sleep-related eating disorder)
- Cognitive behavioral therapy for insomnia

Schedule an appointment with a mental health professional if you need more support. If you have any other questions, speak with your physician.