AgriLIFE EXTENSION
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Food Fact Sheet

EMERGENCY OFFICE MUNCHIES

Sometimes an unexpected crisis or meeting consumes lunchtime. Or we forget a sack lunch in our hurry to get out the door. Or we have an urgent noontime errand to run. According to the National Restaurant Association's 2000 Report, "What's for Lunch? A Survey of Full-Time Employees," 27.3 percent of full-time employees frequently do things other than eating during their lunch break.

Having some back-up foods tucked away in a briefcase, handbag or backpack can help us prevent missing a meal or tide us over until we have a chance to eat. It can also help us avoid hitting the vending machines, scouting for well-filled candy jars or scavenging the break room table. But, these should be EMERGENCY RATIONS, not EVERYDAY EDIBLES for daily desktop dining.

Downfalls of Desktop Dining – Habitually eating at our desks could be hazardous to health for two reasons:

1. The Danger of Becoming a Desk Potato – An abcnews.com article, "Is Work Making You Fat?" writes of "desk potatoes." Sitting for hours at a desk without activity burns few calories. One of the major differences in our society from the past is that more of us now work in sedentary settings.

Results of the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey 1999 indicate an estimated 61 percent of U.S. adults are either overweight or obese, defined as having a body mass index (BMI) of 25 or more. A BMI is measurement of your weight relative to your height.

For adults ages 20 to 74, the prevalence of "overweight" (BMI of 25.0 to 29.9) has increased an estimated 2 percent since 1980, increasing from 33 percent to 35 percent of the population in 1999. "Obesity" (defined as BMI greater than or equal to 30.0) has nearly doubled, from approximately 15 percent in 1980 to an estimated 27 percent in 1999.

Working through lunch or munching at our desks is one more missed opportunity to get some movement into our days.

While picking up your pace physically, getting away from your desk also may give your mind a needed change of pace. Remember, Benjamin Franklin is said to have discovered electricity while flying a kite! And Sir Isaac Newton wasn't at his desk when an apple fell from a tree near him, sparking his theories on gravity.

2. Desktops May be One of the Dirtiest Places in the Office – While some office work ethics may seem to encourage eating at our desks, other offices forbid desktop dining or storing food in our private work areas. We might spill on an important document or piece of equipment. Little creepy creatures might be attracted to the crumbs.

According to a 2001 survey by University of Arizona Microbiologist Dr. Charles Gerba and funded by Clorox, an office desk may contain 400 times more germs than an office toilet seat. The telephone and desktop had the most germs followed by the keyboard and computer mouse. The number of germs PER SQUARE INCH on these office surfaces were:

*   Phone: 25,127
*   Desktop: 20,961
*   Computer Keyboard: 3,295
*   Computer Mouse: 1,676
*   Toilet Seat: 49

Consider – cleaning crews seldom touch office desktops, office phones, etc. Coughing and sneezing my increase the germ population. Crumbs on desktops may attract additional bacteria.

At the time this study was reported, one punster remarked that maybe we should wash our hands "before" going to the bathroom!

If you share a work space with someone, be aware some cold and flu viruses can survive on surfaces for up to 72 hours, according to Gerba. Even if a sick person has gone home, sufficient bacteria to make others ill may be left behind.

If you feel you MUST eat at your desk, clean the surface with a disinfecting wipe. Gerba's study found the number of illness-causing microorganisms could be reduced up to 99.9 percent on office surfaces when they were cleaned daily with a disinfecting wipe. Always read and follow usage directions and precautions on the label of cleaning products before each use.

NOTE: Disinfecting wipes suitable for cleaning office surfaces aren't meant for cleaning your hands. To clean your hands at your desk, both before and after eating, keep a separate container of moist towelettes suitable for this purpose in your work area.

Emergency Munchies – Think twice before stocking a grocery store in your office drawer. Food storage may attract pests to your work area. If your office already has a problem with pest infestation, it might be best to avoid setting your desk up as a feeding station. Plus, if food spills over into the desk drawer and isn't thoroughly cleaned, it can become a breeding ground for bacteria or what Gerba would call a "bacteria cafeteria." Higher temperatures when the office is closed also may contribute to food spoilage in a desk drawer.

If it is suitable to store food in your desk drawer, plan to keep a limited stock of foods and replace them frequently. Check "use by" dates on packages. You'll have fewer problems if you opt for individually wrapped, single-serving portions of foods for a desk drawer. If your office gets hot when your work facility is closed, you might take home any food left at the end of your work week. Food loses quality and deteriorates faster when stored at higher temperatures. You may be better off carrying a small amount of food in a briefcase, handbag or backpack.

Some possibilities for emergency office munchies include the following. Include single-use plastic spoons with foods needing them.

1. Crackers, preferably whole grain and lower in fat and sodium
2. Nuts
3. Soy nuts
4. Individual boxes of 100 percent juice
5. Individual serving bags of microwave popcorn
6. Single serving containers of fruit, preferably lower in added sugar
7. Single serving box of milk-based pudding, preferably lower in fat
8. Small snack pack of crackers and peanut or soynut butter
9. Low-fat granola or protein bar
10. Individual self-stable box of milk

– Source: Food Reflections Newsletter, University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension in Lancaster County