

## features

The latest trends, techniques, and insider secrets—revealed.

### Occupational Hazards

If you're exhausted, irritable, and avoiding the scale, your at-work eating habits may be to blame.

By Carol Forget

Phones are ringing, emails are piling up, and you're rushing toward a deadline like a size 6 at a sample sale. Chained to a cubicle the size of a veal pen, you grow more harried, and hungrier, by the minute. Good thing you squirreled away those KitKats.... But then again, maybe not. Women, overwhelmingly employed in administrative and support positions, can easily slip into the role of martyr at work, keeping long hours, skipping meals, and literally becoming sick and tired—not to mention putting more junk in the trunk.

"Women are brought up to be caregivers," writes stress-management specialist Debbie Mandel in *Changing Habits: The Caregivers' Total Workout*. "We've all been taught to be good little girls and to do it without bragging. So we learn to take it and smother our own needs." Office environments, of course, can be stressful, causing women to gravitate toward sugary, fatty comfort foods, whether from vending machines, the office candy jar, or survival rations stockpiled in their desks. Grabbing a quick fix becomes routine. Add to that a job where you're candy jar, or survival rations stockpiled in their desks. Grabbing a quick fix becomes routine. Add to that a job where you're glued to a chair with no opportunity to exercise, and you have a formula for weight gain, increased sick days, and flagging performance.

### Taking Inventory

In an effort to clean up their acts, these three brave volunteers (see chart at right) revealed their desk-food stashes to Stefan Aschan, a certified fitness trainer, holistic nutritionist, and founder of Strength 123, a training and body-transformation services company. Although their eating habits may seem innocuous on the surface, "All three women are driving on sugar," says Aschan. Many of their desk foods contain high fructose and corn syrup, which are immediately absorbed into the bloodstream as glucose. They cause blood-sugar levels to surge then plummet within 20 to 30 minutes, leaving a desire for stimulants—sugar (candy), simple carbs (pretzels), or caffeine (Diet Coke). "They need to break the cycle," Aschan says. "High fructose and corn syrup provide no nourishment. If they're your energy source, you have to turn this around so that your body craves nutrition." They should also beware of eating the same foods every day—a problem all three women seem to share.

While there's a lot the three desk foodies have in common, Aschan also offers some individualized advice. In the case of Robyn, the sunflower-seed nosher, "Though this probably seems healthy to her, her staple snack falls under the category of fat, which has nine calories per gram, as opposed to proteins and carbs, which yield four calories per gram," he says. In addition, "She seems to eat out of loneliness," he says. "For that reason, it may be better for her to eat with the patients or coworkers." What's more, Robyn needs to eat a healthy breakfast and, if she's using food to keep from dozing off, take a serious look at her lifestyle, along with her eating habits. Mary should cut out the soda and strawberry milk, and although Kristan has made some improvements in her diet, both women are relying heavily on prepackaged foods that are high in preservatives.

### Food for Thought

So if it's time to clean out your desk, where else can you find nutrition? Not in snacks that survive forever in vending machines and drawers. Processing increases shelf life, but nutrients and vitamins are lost—even more so if the food isn't organically produced, Aschan says. Conventionally farmed food, sprayed with pesticides and fungicides, has fewer nutrients because every season the same crops are cultivated in the same soil, he explains. A nutrition deficiency causes you to feel tired because you're not properly metabolizing proteins, fats, and carbohydrates. Where organic food is not available, Aschan's rule of thumb is to eat foods that are as close as possible to the way they come from the earth. "Eat a variety of fresh foods, avoiding anything with unpronounceable label ingredients," he says. In many cases, this means that you'll need to plan your daily snacks in advance.

Aschan acknowledges that it's human nature to want to socialize and offer coworkers treats. "Just do it with the right foods," he says. And luckily, there are plenty of fresh, healthful goodies that don't require you to do any prep work at all. "Grapefruits are great. They're high in vitamin C, and when everyone's rushing on sugar, which suppresses the immune system, white grapefruits enhance it." (Sadly, the pretty pink ones contain more sugar.) He also recommends almonds, pumpkin seeds, and pitchers of ice water with fresh lemon juice squeezed into them. Complex carbohydrates such as brown rice, oatmeal—any whole grain—and sweet potatoes, are all healthy options, according to Mandel, because they raise serotonin levels, without setting off a cycle of what she calls "sugar lust," and enhance our "innate feel-good chemistry."

Beyond that, you can improve your work disposition and boost your energy by starting the day with a healthy breakfast, Mandel says. Then eat a balanced lunch, such as peanut butter on whole wheat with a little all-fruit spread. "You're getting complex carbs in the whole wheat bread and healthy fat and protein from the peanut butter." No fridge? Keep sources of lean protein, such as slices of roasted turkey and containers of yogurt, cool in an insulated bag. Split your lunch hour between eating and taking a walk or exercising to help clear your head, release endorphins, and minimize stress. And finally, empower yourself by taking a few moments each day to recognize what you uniquely bring to your job.



Photo credit: Jorge Sá

### Checking Their Drawers

**Name:** Mary  
**Age:** 41  
**Occupation:** U.S. Navy nurse  
**Location:** Chicago

**Drawer contents:** Ramen noodle soups, trail mix, nuts, peanut butter, crackers. With Mary's busy job, she sometimes squeezes rushed meals between activities. "Having emergency stashes means the difference between a hypoglycemic headache and being pleasant," she says. When supplies run low, she buys pretzels, trail mix, popcorn, candy, sugary sodas, and strawberry-flavored milk from vending machines.

**Name:** Kristan  
**Age:** 34  
**Occupation:** Freelance writer  
**Location:** Sacramento, California

**Drawer contents:** Instant cups of soup, oatmeal, dried fruit, granola/breakfast bars, pretzels. When she worked in an office a few years ago, Kristan kept desk food, but also shared a well-stocked candy jar with her coworkers. "I tried to keep it to a couple of pieces a day, as a treat after lunch or if I worked out," she recalls. "Some days, I was better than others." Kristan admits that sometimes she reached in because of boredom, stress, or a missed lunch. The jar is history now that she works from home, because for her, sharing sweets was really about promoting a friendly office atmosphere.

**Name:** Robyn  
**Age:** 22  
**Occupation:** Administrator at a substance-abuse treatment facility  
**Location:** Idaho Falls, Idaho

**Drawer contents:** Sunflower seeds, Twizzlers, Nibs, gum, M&Ms, granola bars, Diet Coke, assorted candy. "If I can help it, I'm eating something all day," confesses Robyn, who works in an isolated area and thinks one of the reasons she munches is to stay awake. "Sunflower seeds are a staple in my diet while at work," she says. M&Ms are her second choice, and granola bars substitute for skipped breakfasts and lunches.