

THE CHRONONUTRITION QUESTION

Does when you eat matter more than what you eat?

HEALTH



PRIYANKA SHAH

There is something wonderfully ordinary about the first meal of the day. The kettle whistles. Someone is looking for the other sock. A child is asking where the school water bottle is. Your phone has already delivered three messages that you don't want to answer. And somewhere in the middle of all this, you stand in the kitchen and wonder: Should I eat now, or am I better off waiting?

For years, nutrition has trained us to ask a different question: How many calories are on my plate? We weigh, we measure, we count, we compare. Lunch turns into arithmetic and dinner becomes a small negotiation with the weighing scale. But there is another number quietly ticking away in the background — the clock.

This is where chrononutrition enters the conversation. It is the science of how meal timings interact with our body's biological clock, and it raises a genuinely interesting question: Does when we eat matter more than what we eat? The honest answer is no. But it matters more than we once thought, and that distinction is worth sitting with.

YOUR BODY HAS A TIMETABLE

Our bodies are not biologically identical at eight in the morning and 11 at night. We carry an internal circadian rhythm, a roughly 24-hour biological clock that influences sleep, hormones, body temperature, digestion and metabolism. Light is its strongest cue, but food is a powerful one too.

Think of your metabolism as a workplace. During the day, the office is open, the staff are alert and everything is running efficiently. At night, the lights start switching off. The machinery hasn't vanished, but the workplace isn't operating quite the same way.

This does not mean a roti eaten at 8pm magically turns to fat while the same roti at 8am is somehow virtuous. Food doesn't know what time it is. Your body does.

SHOULD WE STOP EATING AFTER SEVEN?

Please don't turn chrononutrition into another food rule. There is nothing biologically magical about 7pm. For someone working a night shift, eating dinner at 9pm with the family, or simply living in a household where dinner happens later, "never eat after seven" is neither realistic nor necessary.

The more useful question isn't: What is the latest acceptable time to eat? It is: How does my eating pattern fit with my sleep, my routine, my activity and my own biological clock? That is a far more intelligent question to ask.

Research does suggest that eating very late, especially close to bedtime and in a pattern that regularly clashes with our circadian rhythm, may have unfavourable effects on metabolic health. Meal timing can influence glucose regulation, insulin sensitivity and appetite. But timing sits alongside the fundamentals of what we eat, how much we eat, how regularly we eat, how active we are, how well we sleep and our overall health.

Chrononutrition isn't a replacement for nutrition. It's nutrition with a clock attached.

THE CALORIE CALCULATOR HAS BEEN GIVEN TOO MUCH POWER

Perhaps the biggest change we need isn't in our meal timings at all, but in our relationship with numbers.

A calorie is a unit of energy. Useful information, nothing more. It is not a moral score. A 500-calorie meal isn't automatically good or bad. Two meals with identical calories can carry very different amounts of protein, fibre, vitamins, minerals and healthy fats. They can leave you full or leave you hungry an hour later. They can affect blood sugar in completely different ways.

This is why I worry when nutrition gets reduced to mathematics. The body is not a spreadsheet. It is a biological system constantly responding to sleep, stress, hormones, movement, food quality, illness, age and routine.

So, instead of only asking how many calories we ate, it helps to occasionally ask something simpler: Did this meal nourish me? Did it keep me satisfied? Did I eat because I was hungry, or because I'd finally found five minutes to sit down? Did I eat so late that I went to bed feeling uncomfortable?

These questions tell us far more about our eating pattern than a calorie counter ever will.

THE DINNER PROBLEM

For many Indian families, dinner isn't simply another meal. It is when everyone comes home. It is when conversations happen. It is when a mother finally sits down after cooking, and when a working couple gets a rare chance to eat together.

Telling people to "eat dinner by 6:30pm" without understanding their lives isn't nutrition advice. It's a timetable imposed from outside.

A more practical approach is if dinner is late, avoid making it unnecessarily heavy. Build the meal around vegetables, an adequate protein source, and sensible portions of carbohydrates and fats. Where your routine allows, try to leave some gap between dinner and bedtime. And if you're genuinely hungry later in the evening, that doesn't make you a failure. Hunger is information, not misbehaviour.

WHAT MATTERS MOST?

If I had to put the whole chrononutrition conversation into an order of priority, it would look something like this:

First, care about what you eat. A diet built mostly around minimally processed foods, vegetables and fruits, adequate protein, whole grains or other high-fibre carbohydrates, and reasonable amounts of healthy fats will always have a stronger foundation than one obsessed with the clock.

Second, care about how much you eat. Portion size matters because your energy needs matter.

Third, care about when you eat. Aim for a reasonably consistent pattern that works with your waking hours and sleep, rather than pushing large meals deep into the night.

Fourth, care about the life surrounding your food: your sleep, your movement, your stress, your work schedule, your family life. A perfectly-timed meal eaten while you're exhausted, anxious and chronically sleep deprived is never the whole answer.

PERHAPS THE REAL QUESTION ISN'T 'WHEN' OR 'WHAT'

We have become very comfortable choosing sides. Carbs or no carbs? Breakfast or intermittent fasting? Early dinner or no dinner? Calories or macros? But biology rarely behaves like a social media poll.

When you eat matters. What you eat matters. How much you eat matters. And why, how and under what circumstances you eat matter too.

Chrononutrition gives us an important reminder that our bodies live in time. But it should never become another reason to be frightened of food.

So, tomorrow morning, when life is rushing around you and you're standing in the kitchen with your cup of tea, don't begin by asking whether you've eaten at the perfect hour. Ask something simpler: Is this a way of eating I can live with, and can my body actually thrive on it?

Because the healthiest diet isn't the one that wins the Internet's approval. It's the one that makes sense on a Monday morning, survives a Wednesday at work, fits around a Friday family dinner, and still feels like food on a Sunday.

The clock matters. But it should never become the master of your plate.

Pictures: istock

Priyanka Shah *is a clinical nutritionist*