

Script – Print – Smoothies and your health: Are they as good as they seem?

Smoothies are a popular meal replacement or snack, and when made with fruit, veggies, yogurt and healthy fats that are good for you, they can be healthy.

But there are a few things to keep in mind before loading up the blender, says Nicole O'Neill, a dietitian with OSF HealthCare.

"The tricky thing is a lot of smoothies are pretty one dimensional and the wrong size," she says. "So, my number one thought is, deconstruct your smoothie and put it on a plate. If you put it on a plate and you look at that plate and go, 'Whoa, that's too much.' Then that means your smoothies is too much." Smoothies usually come in 16 to 32-ounce (475–945-mL) servings.

There's a misconception that smoothies are low in calories, but some drinks pack over a whopping 1,000 calories, depending on their size and ingredients. O'Neill says usually, a 100–200-calorie smoothie with 10 grams of protein is a great snack, and a 400–800-calorie smoothie with at least 20 grams of protein is a better option as a meal replacement.

Smoothies high in protein and fiber may also help with weight loss by keeping you full. O'Neill suggests cutting a smoothie recipe in half if you're trying to create a calorie deficit.

The difference between a healthy and unhealthy smoothie depends on the quality and quantity of its ingredients. "If you're going to use it as a meal replacement, it literally needs to replace your meal, so it has to have protein," says O'Neill. "It has to have fat, fiber, it should have carbs. Those are important for your overall health."

While there are many different ingredients you can use, there are three main types of smoothies.

- **Fruit smoothies.** This smoothie usually features one or more fruits like berries, banana or pineapple and is blended with fruit juice, water or milk.
- **Green smoothies.** Green smoothies pack leafy green vegetables like kale or spinach and fruit blended with water, juice or milk. They tend to include more veggies than regular smoothies.
- **Protein smoothies.** Protein smoothies usually include one fruit or vegetable and a liquid, plus a protein source such as Greek yogurt, cottage cheese or protein powder. The daily recommendation of protein is 60 grams.

The biggest downside of drinking smoothies is added sugar. Protein powder, flavored yogurt, sugar-sweetened juices and nondairy milks are all potential sources of added sugar.

The American Heart Association recommends limiting added sugar to no more than 9 teaspoons (37.5 grams) per day for men and 6 teaspoons (25 grams) per day for women. When making smoothies at home, use whole fruits, such as a banana, instead of honey or maple syrup for added sweetness.

"As a dietitian, my biggest concern is added sugars more than natural sugars," says O'Neill. "So if you're adding a couple tables of honey or maple syrup, or coffee syrups, that's just going to add a calorie load that is not helpful for weight loss. If you're using a lot of fruit and it has a lot of natural sugar in it, the people I'm concerned about with that component are people who are diabetic." In that case, O'Neill recommends more vegetables and less fruit to counterbalance the added sugar.

What makes a good smoothie?

"A really good, healthy smoothie, in my mind, is going to probably have Greek yogurt in it," says O'Neill. "Four ounces of Greek yogurt and a half a banana in it. It might have half a cup of blueberries. You could probably put a scoop of peanut butter, and milk or water to get it to the right texture, or ice cubes, if you like it a little thicker and like a shake." She adds that one-fourth of an avocado fits well in

most smoothies too and adds good healthy fat, plenty of fiber, vitamins and minerals. O'Neill says that either fresh or frozen fruit are fine. She prefers frozen; it's washed, peeled and cut which makes it convenient.

The bottom line is smoothies have a place in our diets with certain limitations.

"I like one smoothie a day as a meal replacement, especially for people who are on the go," says O'Neill. "A smoothie is an easy breakfast option that you can make quick, put it in the cup, take it on the ride to work. Some people do more than one, but you have to be careful to make sure you are getting all the nutrients that you need for the entire day."

For a sample of smoothie recipes, visit [OSF HealthCare](#).