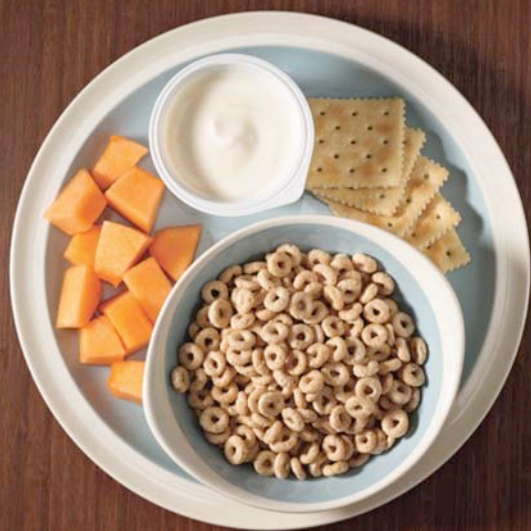




Plan for your hangover

...and other nutritional pitfalls. Annemarie Conte talks to a pro to get **realistic solutions** to your entirely predictable **bad-eating moments**.

Photography by Jonathan Kantor



know I'm not the only one whose dinner sometimes involves standing in front of the fridge at 2 a.m., scarfing General Tso's in an attempt to stave off the next day's hangover. But the last time I tried out a nutritionist, whenever I said, "I want to eat healthier," she kept hearing, "I want to lose weight." So I had to dump her. Thankfully, nutritionist Cynthia Sass is familiar with the slipups associated with being young, poor and single, and she doesn't try to persuade me to write down the number of calories in a stick of Juicy Fruit or weigh my pasta on a mini scale.

I didn't eat breakfast, and now I want to kill everyone.

I stupidly arranged to pick up a Freecycle table on a Saturday morning, so I skip breakfast because I'm late (good dream + feather comforter + snooze button). On my way back, I stop at ShopRite. It's always a bad idea to buy food when hungry—not to mention leaving a table sticking out of your trunk—but I have nothing to eat at home.

Once inside the store, I'm so ravenous that wrestling my wonky-wheeled shopping cart fills me with rage. I see a kid throwing a tantrum over Oreos and am compelled to join her. (I hear you, girl, Double Stuf or nothing.) I take a few deep breaths and call Cynthia. She recommends an emergency Luna bar, which I immediately tear open with my teeth. I expect it to be gritty and gummy, like a PowerBar, but it's sweet and delicious—like candy. As I zigzag down the aisles, less openly hostile now, I play a little game I call "labels are misleading" with Cynthia while I have her on the line.

"The Count Chocula box says it's made with whole grains. Is Count Chocula healthy?" I ask. Cynthia laughs. "Whole grains aren't enough," she says. "You want a cereal that's also high in fiber and contains little, if any, high-fructose corn syrup." I grab a box of Kashi GoLean instead.

"Now, head over to the frozen foods for whole-wheat waffles, blueberries..." she instructs, chastising me for not eating what we all know is the most important meal of the day. Thanks to Cynthia's guidance, I get a variety of five-minute breakfast meals, like the waffles topped with warmed berries; toast with a tablespoon of peanut butter and dried apple rings; plain oatmeal with apple pie spice, sliced bananas and a tablespoon

of chopped pecans; and—my favorite—an English muffin spread with spicy mustard, lettuce, tomatoes and cheese. Cynthia recommends low-fat cheese, but I avoid eating anything that tastes like plastic—except Twizzlers, of course. So I take it upon myself to go to the deli counter and have them slice regular cheddar extra thin.

When I have PMS, a tub of frosting and a salt lick sounds like the perfect snack.

Cynthia and I get along because she's pro-chocolate. We just like it in different amounts. "It's a budget. Like with shopping: If you splurge in one area, you have to scrimp in others," she says. So she sends me out for a single-serving packet of M&Ms. There's just one rule: I must eat them without distractions—no checking e-mail or watching TV—so I'll appreciate how good they taste. She also has me keep 1 percent chocolate milk on hand to blend with ice and cocoa for a healthier milkshake.

When my sweet-toothed Jekyll turns into a savory-craving Hyde, Cynthia's fix is light microwave popcorn with butter-flavored spray and a salt-free seasoning like Cajun, chipotle or ranch (I found them at a health-food store). She also has me chowing on naturally salty celery sticks and grape tomatoes with hummus. Premenstrual epiphany: When I'm eating food I actually like, I barely have time to think about how I hate everyone within a 10-foot radius.

I'm so hungover, I can't even say hangover without gagging.

The last time I felt this gross, I lay facedown on my bathroom floor until my roommate came in to make sure I was still breathing. This time, I call Cynthia from the floor. She gently tells me to avoid anything acidic, spicy or creamy until I start to feel better.

"Hon, you want something nutrient-rich and low in fiber. Do you have cantaloupe, yogurt, Cheerios or maybe a scrambled egg?" she asks. The thought of eggs makes my stomach flip inside out. "Salty," I grunt. "I want salty." V-8, an old standby around my place, is out because it's too acidic, but I do need some salt to help rehydrate me, Cynthia says, because it'll keep any remaining water in my body. She suggests bland food, like crackers, but says that nothing is really going to help until my stomach settles.

I lie on the floor a little longer, weighing the pros and cons of standing up. But the next time I get drunk, I leave popcorn on the counter so it will be the first thing I see when I walk by. I go right past it to get to the cold pizza, but maybe others have more self-control after six vodka tonics than I do.

I only have time for lunch out of the vending machine.

Before I met Cynthia, I handled deadlines the same way I studied for college exams: typing with one hand and shoveling junk into my mouth with the other. In anticipation of my bad habits, Cynthia already had me stock the office freezer. "I like Amy's Burritos, Gardenburger wraps and Seeds of Change meals because they're not as processed as other frozen meals," she says.

So when someone asks if I want to go in on their "party bucket" of hot wings, I'm able to decline with an air of superiority, not longing. Note: This fridge-stocking plan only works if your office isn't filled with thieving types who claim your food as their own. Word quickly gets out that my Amy's Burritos are freaking delicious, so I have to label them with little R.I.P. IF YOU EAT gravestones.

I get so sleepy at 3 p.m., I wish I stowed a cot under my desk.

Every afternoon, a coworker will swing by my desk. "Coffee? Machine cuisine?" And out of either boredom or procrastination, I go. Cynthia says our bodies' natural rhythms are at a low point in the afternoon (aha, so it's not procrastination!). "You want healthy snacks that will keep your energy up," she explains. So I load my desk with dried figs and kindergarten-sized containers of nuts. I also keep apples and an apple slicer close by, plus a jar of peanut butter to spread on the wedges—yum.

I'd expected Cynthia to be a coffee kill-joy, but I can drink all I want, as long as it's at the same time every day, to prevent a caffeine crash. I also keep a bottle of cool water on my desk—"just getting up to refill it energizes you," she says.

Working with Cynthia has taught me that it's all about eating like a Boy Scout—I should be prepared so I don't lose control out of desperation again. (However, losing control out of wanton disregard for my health is another matter entirely.) ♦