I don't get hungry. When should I eat? [1]

Dear Alice,

For as long as I can remember, I've had a fairly low appetite. I love food - cooking it, eating it, savoring it - but if it's not in front of me, I can easily forget about it. In high school, it wasn't uncommon for me to make it through a whole day without realizing I'd only had half a sandwich and a handful of M&Ms to eat. I'm living on my own and cooking my own meals now, but without predetermined family meal times, I'm struggling with portion control and meal planning. So many resources say that I should just "trust my body" when it comes to my diet, but my body won't tell me what it needs! Some days I feel like I'm packing too much food for lunch; other days, I completely forget about lunch altogether. How can I make sure I don't accidentally become a chronic under eater? or overcompensate and eat too much? When and how much should I be eating?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Although you describe your appetite as being low, the fact that you love food makes your problem much easier to manage. It sounds like you're losing track of your eating schedule now that you're on your own, but there are lots of ways to work around this, especially because you like to cook and eat! Establishing healthy habits takes time and effort, but practice makes perfect, and soon enough you'll get into the swing of a healthy routine. Planning your meals in advance, incorporating food into your daily activities, and sticking to a schedule will all help you get there.

A widely accepted general rule is to not eat if you're not hungry. However, not eating all day isn't a particularly healthy pattern? consuming too little food throughout the course of the day may result in shakiness, tiredness, and general mental cloudiness as well as nutritional deficiencies and immune system weakness. The first step: Incorporating a healthy breakfast into your morning routine can help get your metabolism going early in the day, which can help boost appetite later on, helping you remember to eat. Although you may not feel hungry first thing in the morning, consider energizing your body with complex carbohydrates - try whole-grain cereals with milk, whole-wheat toast with peanut butter, or yogurt with nuts and fruit.

Once you've had your breakfast, you have a solid nutritional base to build off of for the rest of the day. Try sticking to a schedule by eating at approximately the same times every day,
whether you choose to eat three large or six small meals per day. Spread your meals apart, and set alarms if needed. When mealtime arrives, make sure to focus on your food, and avoid eating on the go or while watching a movie. Mindfulness will help you get into a routine.

In addition to eating at regular times, try keeping a food journal to analyze your habits. Write down what and when you eat, and after a few days, check your journal for patterns. You might find, for example, that you tend to reach for sweet snacks around 3:00 p.m. for an afternoon pick-me-up. Adjust your food choices and eating schedule according to your observations.

More ideas: Choose a library or workspace that has vending machines with healthy options so you?re reminded to eat, or make a commitment to have lunch with a colleague, classmate, or friend, which will help to incorporate healthy eating into your professional, academic, and social engagements. Always make sure to have healthy snacks on hand so you aren?t forced to make poor nutritional choices under pressure. Nutritious and yummy snack options include string cheese and dried fruit, almonds and low-fat cottage cheese or yogurt, or multigrain crackers with sliced turkey, hummus, or a hard-boiled egg. Prepare your healthy snacks and meals at night so you don?t forget to bring food along with you in the morning.

More generally, have you ever investigated the possible reasons for your lifelong low appetite? Lack or loss of appetite is sometimes indicative of various medical and psychological conditions, so it would be helpful to make an appointment with your healthcare provider to discuss your concerns. Individuals experiencing sudden loss of appetite should meet with a healthcare provider as soon as possible.

Most importantly, be patient with yourself. Don?t try to make too many changes at once; slowly incorporating these ideas into your day will help you get on track without getting burned out or frustrated. If you slip up every now and then, don?t beat yourself up. Instead, ask yourself what caused you to forget to under- or overeat, and consider ways to adapt and prevent this from happening again. Bon appétit!

Alice!

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