Dear Alice!,

I have a very strong aversion to certain food textures such as potato (mashed, chipped, roasted, etc.), that causes me to gag violently. I am 22 years old and have a BMI of 16 which I blame in part to my very unbalanced diet. I am constantly lethargic but am eating three good portion meals a day. I was wondering if there was a way to get over this sensitivity as I am eating cereal without milk every morning, plain pasta for lunch and a pizza for dinner every day, I am looking to be a lot healthier with my life.

Answer

Dear Reader,

Being a picky eater is one thing, but having such strong aversions to certain foods that you gag violently is quite another. You’re right to associate symptoms such as ongoing lethargy with an unbalanced diet, and it sounds as though the difficulties you experience when trying to eat certain foods may be preventing you from meeting your most essential nutritional needs, including calories for energy. Good news? studies show that treatment for individuals who experience similar aversions to a wide variety of foods is highly effective, so keep at it!

Parents and babysitters will attest to the fact that picky eating is very common among children and adolescents. However, highly selective eating behaviors that begin in or last through adulthood are much less prevalent. Fortunately, treatment works; in a study with individuals whose diets were composed of six foods or less, phasing new foods into the diet with an emphasis on trying new foods, not eating large quantities of them, was effective. All study participants who accepted treatment were able to incrementally diversify their diet.

One of the principal consequences of eating an unbalanced diet low in nutrients is becoming underweight. Being underweight may cause a variety of short- and long-term health consequences, including fatigue (as you mention), weakened immune system, fragile bones and osteoporosis, anemia, and for women, interrupted periods and fertility issues. One of the best ways to prevent becoming underweight is to maintain a healthy diet. Looking over the Guide will help you set goals and give you ideas about new foods you may be willing to try, such as delicious and nutritious fruits and vegetables. While maximized for students at
Columbia, the key ideas in the guide can work for anyone and there are additional resources listed.

Seems like your current diet is high in carbohydrates, which may give you a short blast of energy but fade away rather quickly. Have you considered trying other foods of various textures that can help sustain your energy, such as fruit smoothies, nuts, yogurt, and berries? Alternatively, consider recombining ingredients in your existing diet? for example, you might try putting some cheese with tomato sauce on your pasta (almost the same as pizza). Experimentation within the range of your ?safe foods? list may help you become more open to trying new foods. Once you?re ready to try new foods, take small tastes and evaluate what you like and don?t like about the food. You won?t necessarily like every new food you try, and that?s okay? it?s all about being open to experimentation.

In addition to simply disliking the texture of certain foods, there may be emotional factors that are preventing you from eating a well-balanced diet. In fact, clinical trials show that gagging, vomiting, and retching when exposed to a new food is often stress-related. Meditating, using breathing exercises, and experimenting with other relaxation techniques is highly effective. Seeking treatment from a professional may also be helpful.

By slowly incorporating different foods into your diet, you will be on the right path to achieving a healthy weight. For additional input, consider reaching out to a dietician.

The long term health benefits of working to overcome food aversions are well worth it; those who undergo treatment often report enjoying eating more, being less anxious about social situations involving eating, and increased self-confidence both at and beyond the table. Bon appétit!

Alice!

Related questions

How to eat your veggies, even if you don't like them [9]
Eating disorders vs. normal eating [10]
Eating soap? Obsession? [12]
I have an eating disorder and need to gain weight, but how? [13]

Resources

Medical Services (Morningside) [14]
Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside) [15]
get balanced! Guide for Healthier Eating (Morningside) [16]
Medical Services (CUMC) [17]