Dear Alice,

I am a student who is a very picky and health-conscious eater and have grown tired of the food offered in the cafeteria. A good portion of my dietary consumption is in the form of natural peanut butter. I can sit and consume half of a jar in one sitting because I get so hungry and it is the only thing that really satisfies my hunger. Is this a bad thing, and if it is, how can I go about fixing it?

Answer

Dear Reader,

So, there's good news and bad news. The good news is that peanut butter is filled with essential nutrients and vitamins including vitamin E, niacin, folate, magnesium, antioxidants, and oleic fatty acid, which have been shown to be beneficial to cardiovascular health. Going au naturel is even healthier because you get all of the health benefits of regular peanut butter without the harmful trans fats from partially hydrogenated oils that are typically used in processing. The bad news is that too much of a good thing may not be so great? peanut butter is chock-full of calories and fat.

Two tablespoons of peanut butter contain 190 calories and 16 grams of fat. That means eating half of an 18-ounce jar, or 30 tablespoons, would give you 1,425 calories and 120 grams of fat. Even though most of the fat is of the heart-healthy variety, it's still more than twice the recommended daily allowance of about 67 grams of fat per day on a 2,000 calorie diet! And that's just in one meal or sitting, which doesn't count the other foods or meals you may eat during the day.

One thing to think about is why you're so hungry when you sit down to eat. Waiting until you're really hungry to eat something may cause you to overeat. You might want to try eating small meals and snacks throughout the day to prevent this from happening.

It's also important to add some variety to your diet to make sure you're getting all the vitamins and minerals you need to stay healthy. The easiest way to transition from your peanut-butter benders might be to pair peanut butter with other foods. Start by eating apples, bananas, or carrots dipped into peanut butter to increase your fruit and vegetable intake. These foods are nutritious, filling, and low in calories, so you may end up getting less fat and calories while gaining the good stuff. You could also spread peanut butter on whole-grain English muffins, toast, and crackers to increase your fiber intake. Try mixing peanut butter with skim milk,
bananas, and ice in a blender to create a calcium-filled smoothie or spreading it on celery and garnishing with raisins to create "ants on a log." You can use the Internet to look for more recipes, but don't forget to use your imagination? who knows, maybe you'll become a gourmet chef by the time you graduate!

For more tips on eating well while working hard, with or without peanut butter, check out the Go Ask Alice! Nutrition and Physical Activity archives.

Bon appétit!

Alice!
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