Dear Alice,

I am 16 years old and eat nowhere near a balanced diet. To me, vegetables taste terrible. I am very concerned about this. Is there anything I can do to force myself into liking vegetables?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Eating fruits and vegetables is an essential part of maintaining good health. In 2011, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) launched its most recent food guide called Choose My Plate. Most health professionals and health promotion organizations, including the USDA, recommend eating at least five servings of fruits and vegetables daily. Or, in the case of the Choose My Plate campaign, make half of your plate fruits and vegetables.

Since eating vegetables is not very appealing to you, it's good to start by discussing ways to incorporate some essential vitamins and minerals into your diet via fruit. Look to a wide variety of fruits to take in more vitamins, minerals, and phytochemicals, which are plant substances that may ward off heart disease and certain forms of cancer. For example, a fruit salad composed of oranges, assorted berries, grapes, kiwi, bananas, apples, and peaches with fresh lime juice squeezed over it can be enjoyed as a delicious part of any meal or on its own as a snack. A piece of fruit, such as an apple or a pear, is also an excellent dessert and can be paired with protein, such as nut butter or cheese, to make a well balanced snack.
Now, to incorporate vegetables in a positive way. Vegetables can taste bitter, particularly when eaten raw. A good place to begin may be experimenting with roasting a few different vegetables to see what you may like. Roasting vegetables brings out their sweetness via a process called caramelization, which reveals the sugars in vegetables, causing them to taste sweeter. This works particularly well with root vegetables, such as onions, potatoes, sweet potatoes, turnips, and carrots. To roast vegetables, simply cut them into one-inch squares, toss with olive oil, salt, and pepper, place on a baking sheet, and put in an oven at 450 degrees for 30 to 40 minutes, tossing and turning throughout cooking. You will know they are done when they are golden brown, slightly crispy on the outside, and soft on the inside. Broccoli and cauliflower are also delicious when roasted. Feel free to experiment by adding grated parmesan or other cheeses, herbs, and spices to the vegetables after roasting. You can also look to "sweeter" vegetables, such as corn, peas, tomatoes, and carrots and incorporate them into pasta or rice dishes or put them together to make a salad.

It is also possible to disguise vegetables in your food, similar to the way some parents do when their children don't eat their veggies. This is typically done using vegetable purees, which can be made at home simply by microwaving a vegetable and then pureeing it, or can be found in the freezer section (most often found are pureed sweet potatoes or squash) or as jars of baby food in the children's section of your grocery store. Purees can be added to stew, soup, pasta sauce, baked goods, etc.; the options are endless. There are several good cookbooks available that offer recipes that incorporate vegetable purees. You can also sneak in an extra veggie by making fruit smoothies with spinach added in— all you'll taste is the fruit!

In addition to purees, you can also incorporate vegetables into other foods. Examples include:

- Make omelets with tomatoes, peppers, and/or mushrooms— be sure to sauté the vegetables first before adding the eggs.
- Add broccoli and/or olives to your pizza.
- Add chopped spinach and/or grated carrots and onions to turkey burgers or meatloaf.
- Mix chopped carrot and celery into tuna or chicken salad.
- Choose soups rich in vegetables, such as Minestrone or Gumbo.
- Add peas, carrots, and/or zucchini to rice pilaf.

It's difficult to "force" yourself into liking a specific food, especially if you are turned off by the taste. Luckily, you can choose from a variety of vegetable options and cooking methods. Keep an open mind (and mouth), and perhaps you will come to enjoy some of these foods!

For more tips about healthy eating, fruits, and vegetables, you can also check out the Optimal Nutrition [3] section of the Go Ask Alice! archive. Hopefully soon, it'll be easy to get more greens (and other colorful produce) in your diet!

Alice!
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Optimal Nutrition [3]
Healthy Eating [5]

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Resources

Columbia Health Nutrition Services (Morningside) [12]
get balanced! Guide for Healthier Eating (Morningside) [13]
Student Health Service Nutrition Services (CUMC) [14]

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