Dear Alice,

I have a job that is largely sedentary — mostly sitting in an office in front of a computer. My partner’s work is very physically active. Since we’ve been living together, food and nutrition have increasingly become a source of stress and conflict. He needs big meals with lots of protein and calories, and I need better portion control with lots of vegetables. We’re having real problems with shopping and menu planning. Since we’ve been living together, I’ve been gaining weight and he’s been losing! Can you give us any advice or direct us to information on how to live and eat together while addressing both of our nutritional needs?

Thanks,

the Pounds Thief

Answer

Dear the Pounds Thief,

Sounds like you’re in a bit of a dietary pickle! The good news is that you and your partner’s nutritional needs may not be as different as you think. The other good news is that partners who have very different diets and restrictions move in together all the time: vegans with carnivorous dairy lovers, gluten-free and gluten-loving people, diabetics with non-diabetics, pescatarians with vegetarians. You get the idea. So you’re in good company as you try to figure this all out. Read on for information about how to ensure your nutritional needs are being met, while also balancing them with your partner’s needs and preferences.

Caloric needs depend on a variety of factors: age, sex, weight, and amount of physical activity. Depending on your sex assigned at birth, you may have different estimated energy requirements: females tend to need somewhere within the range of 1600 to 2000 calories a day and males often need closer to 2000 to 3000 calories. In terms of activity level, you and your partner are correct in assuming that the differences likely require different caloric consumption. Some sources differentiate physical activity into three categories: sedentary (which includes the day-to-day actions of independent living like walking around the house or making the bed), moderately active (which includes the activities of sedentary lifestyles with the addition of the equivalent of
one and a half to three miles of brisk walking) and active (which includes physical activity that equates to over three miles of brisk walking and generally is used to describe athletes). Sedentary folks usually fall on the lower end of the estimated energy requirements range, while an active lifestyle puts an individual on the higher end. It’s also worth noting that caloric needs decrease over the course of the adult aging process.

How many calories you consume is one thing, but eating a balanced diet can also lead you to have more energy and stay full longer. There are a number of factors that can have an effect on what constitutes a balanced diet for individuals, but ultimately, one that incorporates fibrous carbohydrates (carbs), healthy fats, and protein is beneficial, regardless of levels of physical activity. Research suggests that individuals eat 10 to 35 percent of calories from protein sources, with the high end of the spectrum being for individuals with active lifestyles. While protein forms an integral part of a balanced and healthy diet, people generally overestimate how much they need. Excess protein can decrease calcium absorption and can cause kidney stones, and it’s stored as fat if it isn’t used to form muscle. While carbohydrates sometimes get a bad reputation, it’s recommended that 45 to 65 percent of your daily calories come from carbohydrates. The more fiber in those sources, the better. It’s also great if your carbohydrates are coming from dark leafy greens such as kale and spinach, because these will also have lots of iron and B vitamins. It’s suggested that fat make up only ten to 35 percent of daily calories, with a focus on monounsaturated fats (avocados, olive oil, flax, fish) and avoiding trans fats (found in some types of margarine, fried foods at restaurants, and store-bought snacks) and saturated fats (found in dairy, vegetable oil, and meats). To put it in context, that’s between 22 and 78 grams of fat for a 2000-calorie a day diet.

Couples with different caloric or dietary needs may opt to do a bit more planning and be more intentional about their menus than others. There’s no rule that says you have to eat exactly the same items at the same time and in the same amounts. Here are some tips to help with meal prep:

- If you’re worried about portion control, consider being mindful of how much you put on your plate at a time. People often feel compelled to finish what’s on it, even if they’re no longer hungry. Try loading your plate with less and then going back for more if you’re still hungry. You could also try using a smaller plate so it limits the amount of food you’re able to pile onto your plate.
- Try to keep fewer snacks that aren’t as nutritious in the house. If they aren’t there, you’re less likely to consume them when you get hungry.
- Speaking of snacks, do you eat throughout the day? If not, consider indulging in some healthy snacks between meals! You may eat less at meal times if you’ve been snacking some throughout the day. This practice may also be easier on your metabolism and digestive system.
- Along these same lines, try to avoid skipping meals. This can make you hungrier by the next meal and that’s when people are most likely to eat more than needed.
- Buy foods you both like and alternate nights cooking for each other. On the night your partner cooks for you, ask him to cook the foods you prefer. If it’s not quite enough for him, perhaps he can cook up a side dish for a little extra grub. On the night you cook for him, try making him a meal he loves. If he doesn’t want veggies, you could cook up a side of veggies for yourself. This can be a great way to honor each other’s dietary preferences.
Another way to make sure both of your caloric needs are being met is to count calories using a journal or calorie counter. This can help ensure that your partner is eating enough and that you don't eat more than you need.

Do you like cooking together? Consider taking a cooking class or checking out some recipes online that might incorporate food ingredients that you both would enjoy. Make it a fun project of discovery.

As you noted, having different activity levels and different dietary needs in the same household can be a source of stress. But, working through and honoring these differences can also strengthen a relationship.

Here's to love and food,

Alice!

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Relationship Stuff [5]
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Related questions

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Helping a friend to eat healthier [9]

Resources

Columbia Health Nutrition Services (Morningside) [10]
Student Health Service Nutrition Services (CUIMC) [11]

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