

## Campus dining and high blood pressure <sup>[1]</sup>

Alice,

I have a high blood pressure problem. What kind of food should I get at the campus dining hall?

— Pumping

### Answer

Dear Pumping,

It's great that you're thinking about how your diet can help you manage your high blood pressure (HBP). Having a wide variety of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and proteins can help ensure your body gets the nutrients it needs and still bring down your blood pressure. In addition to considering your diet, some other lifestyle habits may also help to improve your blood pressure. Ready to give it the old college try? Keep on reading!

When eating to reduce blood pressure, choosing foods that are low in saturated fat, sodium, and added sugars can be helpful to achieve your goals. Specifically, in terms of eating on campus, it can be helpful to look for these foods to add to your plate to help you in your quest for lower blood pressure:

- **Fruits and vegetables:** At breakfast, you could try adding fruit (fresh or dried) to cereal, yogurt, or oatmeal. You may grab an apple, banana, orange, or a pear alongside a veggie soup or sandwich for lunch. At dinner, pile your plate with leafy greens and make a tasty salad or add a generous side of steamed carrots, broccoli, or asparagus to your meal.
- **Whole grains** <sup>[2]</sup>: If you fancy a bagel or toast to start your morning, one option is to select ones that are 100 percent whole wheat. For lunch, try a whole grain salad with quinoa, wheat berries, or brown rice. Got a craving for an Italian dinner? Opt for whole wheat pasta with your marinara sauce.
- **Proteins (including poultry sans skin, lean meats, beans, and fatty fish):** When perusing options in the morning, consider opting for beans in your breakfast burrito or egg scramble. Try a fresh roasted turkey breast wrap or veggie burger for lunch. Baked or grilled chicken or salmon may be what hits the spot right around supper time.
- **Low-fat or fat-free calcium sources:** For a creamy, dreamy breakfast, you might request

skim dairy milk, low-fat fortified soy milk, or fat-free yogurt in your favorite fruit smoothie order. At lunch, you could grab a side of low-fat cottage cheese. If dinner calls for a grilled cheese sandwich to go along with your tomato soup, ask for a low-fat variety.

Often, sodium is found in highly processed foods (such as potato chips, candy, or deli meats, to name a few) as it may act as flavoring or a preservative. Choosing unprocessed foods when you have the opportunity may help you reduce your sodium intake. Additionally, not adding any additional salt to the food you eat may help you not consume as much. If you want to find out if salt was added during the cooking process, you may find it useful to ask the people who work in the dining hall how the various meals were cooked.

Now that you know a bit more about what foods can help you to curate a healthy and balanced plate in the dining hall, you might also want to look out for these same foods beyond the campus boundaries. It's also a helpful rule of thumb to familiarize yourself with nutrition labels so you can identify these ingredients and nutrients in pre-packaged foods as well. Looking for sodium content, saturated fats, and sugar can be good places to start when determining whether or not a product may meet your dietary needs.

While being thoughtful about what you eat can certainly be a part of the healthy blood pressure equation, there are additional factors to consider and incorporate when trying to lower your BP numbers:

- **Getting regular physical activity:** Keeping the body moving can help to lower blood pressure. For some, higher weights may correspond with higher blood pressure. These folks may find that losing weight may help to reduce their blood pressure. Whether or not weight is a contributing factor to your high blood pressure, being and staying active can help bring blood pressure down.
- **Managing stress levels** <sup>[3]</sup>: Adopting healthy stress coping strategies can help reduce chronic stress, which is a noted contributor to high blood pressure.
- **Reducing or avoiding intake of certain substances:** In addition to lowering sodium, sugar, and saturated fat intake, limiting alcohol and caffeine can also help to reduce it. If you smoke, quitting may also support lowering blood pressure.

Overall, what you eat is one factor that influences blood pressure. Taking into consideration other lifestyle habits and behaviors that contribute to high blood pressure are also key components to getting your BP numbers to a healthy range. The good news is that you don't have to do it all on your own — your health care provider can give you additional advice and support as you move forward. You might also consult with a registered dietitian to help guide you through the dining options at your school — many campuses employ these professionals to help students do just that! Lastly, to learn more about nutrition habits in general, you may find the *Go Ask Alice! Nutrition & Physical Activity* <sup>[4]</sup> archives to be helpful.

Happy dining!

Alice!

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