Is fear of dietary fat considered an eating disorder? [1]

Dear Alice,

Are there other types of eating disorders other than anorexia and bulimia? For example, I have this fear of unnecessary fat in food and eat everything "plain," that is, without butter, oil, dressing, or sauce, etc. I thought that it's good that I'm this health conscious, but my friends say that it's a little obsessive. Is this an eating disorder?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Many people aspire to be "health conscious"; the trouble is it's not always easy to know when you've crossed the line from just trying to be healthy to overly-focusing on food. In the case of eating disorders, health care professionals use specific criteria to diagnose conditions such as anorexia and bulimia nervosa. Although many people's behaviors do not fit exactly into these diagnoses, some individuals still experience a number of issues with their eating. Rather than being diagnosed with a particular eating disorder, they are sometimes described as having "disordered eating." Disordered eating is a classification that is not specified as anorexia or bulimia nervosa are, but has ideas, principles, and/or behaviors from one or both. Physical symptoms may or may not be present, but patterns may be displayed by obsessive-compulsive behaviors. Disordered eating patterns run the gamut from having idiosyncrasies, such as a fear of unnecessary fat, to severely impacting or disrupting one's life and/or daily routine.

Now, concerning your question about fat intake; eliminating all butter, oil and other fats does not a healthy eating plan make. Our bodies need fat for a variety of reasons:

- Fat is essential in the absorption of vitamins A (involved in vision), D (required for calcium absorption), E (part of every cell membrane and acts as an antioxidant), and K (necessary for blood clotting and is involved in bone health).
- Dietary fat provides Essential Fatty Acids (EFAs), which are supplied through food. EFAs are necessary to produce hormone-like substances that regulate body processes, such as blood pressure, immune response, and kidney and gastrointestinal functioning, among others.
- Insufficient fat intake disrupts hormone balance. In women, this may interfere with
menstruation, and can also have severe consequences on their bones, possibly even leading to bone fractures and osteoporosis later in life.

- Eating too little fat may inhibit the production of the hormone testosterone. In men, reduced testosterone production could interfere with building muscle.

Being health conscious is something to strive toward, but good health requires that we take in some fat. Olive oil, canola oil, nuts, seeds, avocados, and higher fat fish, such as salmon, provide healthful fats. Incorporating some of these into your eating plan, little by little, may be a good place to start. You may also discover a new flavor dimension that your food has been lacking; enjoying your food is certainly a good consideration when planning a healthy diet.

Moving on from fat, let's entertain the idea of control for a moment; meaning, what is the underlying reason(s) driving you on a daily basis to scrutinize your fat consumption? Are you concerned about gaining weight? Do you feel pressured to lose weight or maintain your current weight? Do you simply feel a need to "be in control"? Are you worried about the health risks of eating too much fat (such as high cholesterol, cardiovascular disease, etc.)? By considering what might be bothering you you may be able to resolve that particular issue and come up with strategies for addressing it without severely limiting your fat intake. For example, if you are concerned about gaining weight, you could focus on eating a balanced diet and exercising moderately. See the related Q&As for more information.

Delving further into your psyche, you could ask yourself these questions (you may want to keep a food journal, to write out how, why, when, and what you feel when eating or not eating particular foods — to really pinpoint a pattern):

- Do you have sufficient energy throughout the day to carry out your daily activities?
- How content are you, for the most part, with your relationships?
- Do you miss social functions due to your "plain" eating habits?
- Do you really consider yourself health conscious? Or, would "health anxious" be a more suitable description?

Many people find it useful to speak with a health care provider to help clarify their behaviors, whether they are healthy or unhealthy, and what steps they can take to improve their relationship with food. You could speak with your primary care doctor, a Registered Dietitian, a counselor or therapist, nurse or even a trusted friend who might be able to point you in the right direction.

You've taken a great first step towards understanding your relationship with food, and whether it is healthy. In addition to reading more and/or working with a professional, surrounding yourself with people who have healthy relationships with food and an "everything in moderation" philosophy is another great way to support yourself as you think about these issues.

Alice!

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