

ALWAYS hungry! ^[1]

Dear Alice,

For a few months now, I've been hungry all the time. I mean all the time — in the morning, at night, while eating, and even after a big meal. I snack all the time but it doesn't seem to change much. I exercise regularly (but not excessively) and try to eat healthy and I don't seem to have gained much weight. I try to fill myself up with healthy snacks like fruit and nuts. I'm a vegetarian, so I do wonder if the constant hunger could indicate that I'm not getting enough protein, but I haven't eaten meat in years and this feeling only started a few months ago. I know nuts are supposed to be good for you, but I lately I've been eating three or four servings a day, which is quite a bit for a 108 pound woman. (And I'm 22, so I'm not still growing.) Do you know what this could be? Is it possible I have some sort of intestinal parasite? Or is it nothing to worry about? Thanks so much.

— Overactive eater

Answer

Dear Overactive eater,

Generally, a case of the munchies is your body's way of signaling that it's time to refuel. If snacks and even full meals don't fill you up, there may be another cause for your ongoing hunger. If diet changes don't do the trick, a visit to a health care provider may ease your mind and your appetite. Based on your description, it sounds like you can rule out the possibility of a digestive parasite. Rather than fueling your hunger, most stomach bugs cause digestive troubles like nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea that can kill your appetite. There is one infamous bug, the Taeniasis parasite (a.k.a., tapeworm), that is often blamed for insatiable appetites or unintended weight loss. However, Taeniasis is acquired by eating infected pork or beef so it's not likely that you have a tapeworm since you've been vegetarian for years.

As you suggested, people who follow a vegetarian diet sometimes don't get enough protein. These power nutrients give your body energy and also help you feel full, more so than carbs or fruits and vegetables. Vegetarians also need to consider the *kind* of proteins they eat. Unlike meats, individual plant foods don't supply all the amino acids that your body needs. To make sure you're getting a complete protein package, try combing two complementary foods that offer

different amino acids from these four protein groups: grains, legumes or beans, seeds and nuts, and eggs and dairy. For example, a PBJ sandwich combines grains (go for whole wheat bread!) and legumes (peanuts) for a complete protein. Similarly, a yogurt parfait with fruit and almonds complements dairy with nuts. Newer research has indicated that protein pairings need not be consumed at the same time (i.e., it's sufficient to combine the complementary foods within the same day). For more tasty protein pairings, check out the related Q&As about protein sources.

Another source of satisfaction comes from eating enough fat. Depending on your level of physical activity and other factors your fat needs will vary. However recent research shows that eating moderate amounts of healthy fats can really help satisfy. In addition to nuts, think avocado and healthy oils (canola, olive, safflower, trans-fat free spreads). Check out [ChoseMyPlate.gov](https://www.choosemyplate.gov) ^[2] to calculate your calorie, protein, fat, and carb needs and determine whether what you're eating is enough to meet your nutritional needs.

To make sure you're eating enough of the right proteins and fats as part of a balanced diet, it may also be helpful for you to keep a food journal. You can use the journal to plan out meals, make grocery lists that include healthy and filling snacks, and record when and what you eat throughout the day (and night). The food journal may help you answer some key questions to explain the uptick in your appetite. For example, are you eating enough calories throughout the day to make you feel full? Do your tummy rumblings coincide with any particular emotions like stress, sadness, or happiness? If you do end up seeing a health care provider, the journal will help them understand your diet and what might be causing your excess hunger.

If diet changes don't seem to satisfy your hunger, there may be an underlying health condition that's giving you the munchies. Causes of increased appetite may include:

- Anxiety
- Certain medications (such as corticosteroids and some antidepressants)
- Bulimia
- Diabetes
- Hyperthyroidism
- Grave's disease
- Hypoglycemia
- Premenstrual syndrome (PMS)

List adapted from [MedlinePlus](#) ^[3].

Since there are a variety of explanations for your hunger pangs, if adding a healthy balance of proteins and fats to your plate won't satiate your appetite, your best bet is to see a health care provider. Getting medical attention is a good idea especially if you have any other unexplained symptoms like frequent urination, increased heart rate, or feeling very thirsty.

Fueling up with more complete proteins and healthy fats may help you feel full and keep your body running strong. If your hunger still hangs around, visit a health care provider to find out what your body needs to fill up and feel good.

Take care,

Alice!

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