

Herbal teas tame the munchies, but are they a healthy substitute? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I am currently trying to revise my eating habits to eat less often (I'm a throughout the day snacker, and normally don't eat meals). Is it okay to replace cravings or "boredom eating" with herbal teas? I was told that tea is a no calorie drink, and yet it fills me up when I'm hungry. I have started to replace most of my cravings with tea now, so that I actually eat a lot less than before. Is tea healthy for you if it is no caffeine, herbal, and I use honey to sweeten it? I am not used to drinking much of anything in the day and am fairly slim, so could the extra water intake have any weight gaining effects on me? Could this be a healthy diet?

— Rebuffing the munchies with tea

Answer

Dear rebuffing the munchies with tea,

You pose some interesting questions — and they're great ones to ask to inform the best eating pattern for you. First, you asked if it's healthy to drink herbal tea instead of eat. While herbal tea can be a part of a healthy diet, the answer really depends on the reason for replacement. If you find that going for a cup of tea helps you curb snacking when you're not really hungry, then it may be a reasonable strategy for you. If you really are hungry though, then replacing food with a beverage may not be beneficial to your overall health (more on this in a bit). You also asked about water weight. Drinking water (or tea) doesn't cause weight gain and staying hydrated is an integral part of keeping yourself healthy. So, herbal tea can contribute towards your daily water needs, but it's recommended that it be a part of a balanced diet and not a substitution for the food your body needs.

What exactly is herbal tea? Some companies and brands define "herbal" as anything plant-based and caffeine-free. However, others include caffeinated teas like green, black, and oolong teas, which are made from *Camellia sinensis*. Therefore, lots of teas may have herbal on the packaging. When it comes to caffeinated tea varieties, you may experience a diuretic effect

(caffeine is a substance that can increase urination). However, research suggests that moderate consumption of caffeinated beverages does not cause dehydration. Thus, many kinds of tea can contribute to your body's hydration needs. Beyond caffeine, it may also be helpful for you to know what else is in your herbal tea. Herbal ingredients are not regulated by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) like medications (prescription and over-the-counter). Also, plant-based doesn't necessarily mean "safe," and some herbal ingredients can interact with medications.

Assuming your herbal tea is safe for you to consume, it can be a positive addition to your eating and drinking repertoire. However, if you are drinking tea instead of eating when your body needs food, you may not be getting needed nutrients and fuel for energy. Additionally, you may be famished come mealtime, so it could be more difficult to make balanced food choices. People eat for a variety of reasons including hunger, boredom [2], and stress, so being in tune with your body, your emotions, and your state of mind can help you to determine whether you need a snack, a meal, or just a cup of tea! It might help to track when and why you eat to gain a bit of perspective. If you find you're eating due to stress or boredom rather than hunger, a cup of tea could be an emotionally-comforting alternative. Tea won't, however, change underlying causes behind food cravings [3]. Having an idea about the underlying causes of your cravings and desires can help you navigate how to best address them in a healthy and satisfying way!

You also mention that you prefer to have snacks during the day rather than eating large meals. Having multiple smaller meals every day can provide benefits over eating a large quantity of food a few times per day, depending on what food is being consumed. A healthy eating plan includes a wide variety of foods including different fruits and veggies, whole grains, dairy, legumes, lean meats, fish, and poultry, and heart healthy fats [4]. Choosemyplate.gov [5] is a great resource for more information about putting together a healthy plate of food. Drinking caffeine-free herbal tea with a touch of honey as a snack or an in-between meal treat can be a part of a balanced diet (though, it may be worth mentioning that honey has not been found to be much different in the way of nutrients than table sugar). With that in mind, "snack food" doesn't have to be synonymous with "junk food." Well-planned, healthy snacking [6] can contribute to a balanced eating pattern and lifestyle.

Lastly, more about your concern that the additional liquid intake may contribute to weight gain. Water by itself doesn't cause weight gain in the form of body fat and it contains no calories (and many herbal teas do not add calories either). A bit of honey adds some calories, but as long as it's added in moderation, it's unlikely to contribute considerably to weight gain. Drinking water and being hydrated actually has a number of benefits and supports multiple functions in the body [7]. So, in that sense, no-calorie herbal tea can continue to be up your alley!

It's great that you're being thoughtful about how you fuel your body. Cultivating a positive relationship with food and considering the underlying causes of cravings may lead to happier, healthier emotions and better physical health. With herbal tea, water, smart snacks, and delicious (and nutritious!) meals, you may well have the components of a healthy eating pattern. Still not sure about how to move forward or whether herbal tea is right for you? Speaking with your health care provider or a registered dietitian may give you some specific insight based on your personal health history and current dietary intake.

Here's to pinkies up as you tip your teacup!

Alice!

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- [1] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/herbal-teas-tame-munchies-are-they-healthy-substitute-0>
- [2] <http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/im-bored-so-i-eat>
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- [5] <https://www.choosemyplate.gov/>
- [6] <http://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-living/recipes/snack-recipes/rcs-20077251/>
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