Eating healthy at the campus dining hall? [1]

Dear Alice,

My campus offers a plethora of unhealthy foods — ranging from pizza, to Chinese, to tacos. They do offer salads and fruits, but they don't fill you up! What should I do to eat healthy, but not feel hungry all day! Please help!

— Hungry

Answer

Dear Hungry,

Going off to college opens many opportunities for learning — in this case, how to make healthy food choices on your own. It may be that you grew up with relatively balanced meals that are now replaced by a smorgasbord of dining hall offerings. Having nearly unlimited access to a variety of foods is a new challenge for many students. However, focusing on eating foods that are high in fiber and protein may help you feel full longer and help narrow down the options in the dining hall.

One easy tip for healthy "all you care to eat" dining: When you place food on your plate, try filling half with different colored steamed, grilled, broiled, or raw vegetables. Of the remaining half, leave one fourth for lean proteins, such as beans, tofu, grilled skinless chicken, or baked skinless fish. The remaining fourth of the plate can hold whole grains, such as whole wheat bread or brown rice. More information on dividing up your plate can be found on the United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) MyPlate [2] website.

What's more, the foods that you mentioned — pizza, Chinese food, and tacos — aren’t inherently unhealthy. Each contains ingredients from key food groups and provides energy to fuel your brain and body. Sometimes though, these foods are prepared in such a way that they can be high in fat (which helps folks to feel full), but also adds extra calories. That said, these foods can be part of a balanced meal if they share the plate with side dishes that are low in fat, high in fiber, and nutrient dense. For example, to balance a plate that includes pizza, you can try one slice with chicken and veggies on whole wheat crust (if available) and fill the rest of your plate with a salad. Or on taco night, grab your favorite meaty, cheesy, or beany taco and fill the rest of your plate with steamed or grilled veggies and brown rice. Making regular meals of a plate full of fruit,
veggies, lean protein, and whole grains can fill and satisfy, and leave plenty of wiggle room for the occasional treat, such as French fries or ice cream.

Depending on the layout of your dining hall, you may need to poke around to find the healthiest options. That said, it's likely there are plenty of grilled, steamed, baked, or broiled veggies, proteins, and whole grains to fill your plate. Healthy dining options to look out for include:

- A salad bar (but watch out for foods high in fat and sodium such as croutons and cream-based dressing)
- Whole grain bread or bagels
- Entree options without breading
- Cooked veggies without batter or heavy sauces
- Broth-based soups (rather than cream-based)
- Low-fat milk or yogurt for cereal or granola
- Whole pieces of fruit or fresh fruit salad
- Seltzer water or diet soda

If you've found yourself eating more than you've planned at the dining hall previously, a few strategies you may try using a smaller plate if available or only filling half your plate and going back for seconds if you still feel hungry. Another idea is to let your stomach settle before going back for seconds to make sure you're actually still hungry. And if you're still hungry, consider making your next serving a fiber-rich piece of fruit — that way, you have a filling and sweet end to your meal.

For recommendations tailored to individual dietary needs, food experiences, and taste preferences, you can make an appointment with your school's registered dietitian. The staff at the dining hall are also a great resource, as they're familiar with the menus. They may be able to answer your questions regarding foods that are prepared in a healthier manner and the concerns about trying to eat a balanced diet. For even more tips on navigating the dining hall, check out MyPlate’s 10 Tips: Be Choosy in the Dining Hall [3].

Bon appétit!

Alice!

Category:
Nutrition & Physical Activity [4]
Food Choices & Health [5]
Healthy Eating [6]

Related questions
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Getting off colas, sodas, pop, fizz... oh, whatever! [9]

Resources
Columbia Health Nutrition Services (Morningside) [10]