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Ooh, baby, I like it raw (or, is a raw diet healthy?) ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I have been hearing a lot about the "raw diet," a diet in which you only eat raw vegetables, fruit and sprouts, and drink only purified water. The people who eat this way claim that they have more energy, feel better, and look better. I would like to try this diet... but I don't know if it is completely safe and healthy. What do you think?

Thanks,
Considering

Answer

Dear Considering,

Humans are the only animals to cook their food before eating it. Some evidence indicates that cooked food allowed the human brain and body to develop amazing complexities due to increased access to varieties of food and time. Others believe that the humans who cooked their first meal 40,000 years ago took a step towards a long fall from grace that eventually led to fast food, heart disease, and related health concerns. There's a lot of information to digest if you choose to go raw, so read on!

A raw food diet consists of any food that is cooked no more than 118 degrees Fahrenheit, which is based on the theory that keeping raw food's natural enzymes intact allows the body to better absorb nutrients. Foods that are usually cooked, like grains and legumes, are broken down in other ways like soaking and sprouting. Soaking and sprouting seeds, grains, nuts, and legumes renders them full of enzymes, fully digestible, and high in proteins, vitamins, fats, and minerals. Fruits and vegetables may also be dehydrated into breads and cookies, blended into warm (under 118 degrees F) soups, or juiced. Some people who follow a raw diet report experiencing increased energy, improved skin appearance, better digestion, weight loss, and reduced incidence of heart disease. However, there is no evidence that it can cure any condition or disease, and it can lead to potential nutrient deficiencies over time.

If you do choose to eat a raw diet, there are a number of benefits and drawbacks to consider before making this change.

Benefits of a raw diet include:

- There is less trans and saturated fats, [cholesterol](#) [2], and sodium in a raw diet.
- A raw diet can lower a person's low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol, their body weight, and their [triglycerides](#) [3].
- Certain compounds such as isothiocyanates, which are protective against cancer, are more prevalent in raw food than cooked food.

On the flip side, there are also some drawbacks to consider before choosing to eat a raw diet:

- The evidence to support raw food diets is limited; few scientific, population-based studies back up the claims of significant health benefits.
- Cooking some foods allows the body to more easily digest proteins and carbohydrates, and makes certain nutrients more available to the systems for absorption. For example, lycopene, a plant chemical, is found in greater abundance when a tomato is cooked than when eaten raw. Similarly, cooking a carrot releases a greater quantity of beta carotene than eating a raw one.
- Cooking helps to destroy certain bacteria and food-borne illnesses.
- Vitamins and minerals such as calcium, iron, protein and vitamin B12 may be consumed less, unless raw diet followers take additional supplements and consume adequate amounts of sprouted beans, nuts, and seeds.
- Eating a raw diet may pose risks, such nutrition deficiencies or foodborne illnesses, for pregnant or nursing women, babies and young children, elderly people, people with anemia, people at risk for osteoporosis, and people with compromised immune systems or autoimmune disorders.

As you ponder this decision, keep in mind that what feels right for your body, lifestyle, climate, and nutritional needs may change throughout your life. If you're looking to eat healthier, you can make changes in your diet without restricting yourself to a raw food diet or any other restrictive pattern of eating. By eating a balanced diet that incorporates fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean sources of protein, you can have experience many of the positive effects of a raw diet. It's also worth noting that any drastic diet change is no small feat to accomplish alone! If you'd like to look into it more, consider talking with your health care provider or registered dietitian to help you examine what a raw diet entails, determine whether it's a good fit for you, and if so, discuss common pitfalls to avoid. If you want to learn more about how to fuel your body, check out the [Optimal Nutrition](#) [4] category in the [Nutrition & Physical Activity](#) [5] archives.

Raw-k on!

Alice!

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Published date:

Jul 28, 2000

Last reviewed on:

Sep 22, 2017

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