Dear Alice,

My friends and I disagree—can you settle the dispute? I feel a calorie is a calorie no matter what time of day that you eat it. They say that if you eat all of your calories early in the day, that it is less fattening, because you will be moving around burning off those calories. I say that if you eat 1800 calories a day, it doesn’t matter if you eat them in 5 meals or 10 meals, it is still 1800 calories. I believe that the idea of not eating anything after 7 helps you to lose weight because you cut out the high calorie, high fat foods that are often eaten late in the evening. They say that by not eating after 7, you lose weight because you're not moving to burn off those calories. Please settle the dispute. Thanks.

Answer

Dear Reader,

You and your friends have picked up on a popular debate. One aspect of weight management that is vital to understand is that we gain and lose weight over periods of time—weeks, months, years—not hour by hour. This happens as we take in more calories than we expend. Another important fact of metabolism is that our bodies do not stop working, even when we are sleeping! Hearts are beating, blood is circulating, lungs are functioning, brains are even working. This all takes energy—meaning we are still burning calories.

There is no magic time after which the body stores fat. For instance, if you eat the same exact meal at 6 pm or at 8 pm, is one more caloric than the other? No, each meal has the same number of calories. What really matters is the total amount of food and drink you have over the course of a week, or a month or longer, and how much energy you expend during that timeframe. Excess calories will be stored as fat over time, regardless of whether they are taken in during the day or night.

When it comes to eating late at night and the potential for weight gain, there are several considerations:

- Portion sizes? waiting to eat could lead to consuming larger portion sizes.
- Quality of food? after a long day of work or school, a few slices of pizza or a fast burger may seem easier than steamed vegetables and broiled fish.
- "Mindless snacking"? evenings spent studying, going out, or watching TV may lead to excess calories from fast, sugary, on-the-go options.
- Health concerns? consistent periods of going without food followed by a large meal can
negatively impact the interaction between blood sugar and insulin and make you more vulnerable to Type 2 diabetes.

So, to settle the debate, you are correct that late-night calories won't change your metabolism or magically count more than calories eaten during the day. However, limiting late-night meals and snacks may be an effective weight management strategy for some because it helps them to control their overall calorie intake. Some people find that if they set a time that they can't eat past, it helps minimize or eliminate the possibility of munching on a lot of high calorie foods. Another useful tip may be to eat four or five smaller meals and snacks spread evenly throughout the day so you don't become overly hungry at any point. Following these tips can keep your energy levels consistent for work and play and can provide some long-term benefits to help you reduce your chances for diabetes or other health issues.

Bon appétit!

Alice!

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