No time to cook? [1]

Dear Alice,

I sometimes can't find the time to cook for weeks at a stretch. During these periods, I live on whole grain bread, cheese, and fruits (usually pears). Oh, and a couple of soft-boiled eggs at breakfast. I feel very healthy, but my friends have told me that this diet is low in minerals. Is this true? If it is, what should I add to it?

Yours sincerely,
Simple Tastes

Answer

Dear Simple Tastes,

Actually, your diet does sound fairly healthy...for one day, once in a while! What it's missing is variety? you need to vary your foods in order to cover all your vitamin and mineral, or micronutrient, requirements (and not get bored with your food!). Also, it turns out you have good, caring friends who are giving you helpful advice!

Back to varying your diet? luckily, variety doesn't always require lots of time or effort. You can get your micronutrients by quickly including vegetables in the foods you're already eating. Start by adding lettuce, tomato, and/or red pepper slices to your whole grain bread and cheese combo. You can buy the veggies pre-washed and sliced at many grocery stores and delis. Snacking on mini-carrots that come pre-washed and peeled or enhancing your meals with frozen vegetables can also help provide necessary nutrients. What about adding a veggie to your soft-boiled eggs at breakfast? Frozen spinach would taste great and is also quick to prepare.

Next, throw in some additional fruits. Varying by color helps to insure a wide variety of nutrients. So, what about apples? You can choose from a variety of types (e.g., Granny Smith, Empire, and Macintosh) and they are fairly inexpensive. Canned foods are great to have around. Pick up some canned pineapple, mandarin oranges, or peaches. Try to purchase canned fruit in their own juice instead of in heavy syrup? this cuts down on the sugar. What about slicing a banana in your canned pineapple? Easy breezy.

Your body also needs minerals to stay healthy. Some of these minerals include calcium, iron, sodium, manganese, copper, iodine, and magnesium. Since dietary guidelines are different from one person to the next, check out ChooseMyPlate.gov [2] for an extensive breakdown
based on daily calorie intake and age. Here are a few of the overall messages:

- **Great grains:** Grain products include bread, pasta, rice, and crackers. Grains can be whole-grain or refined, but whole-grains are best. Aim to make half of the total amount of grains eaten in one day the whole-grain kind.

- **Taste the rainbow:** Eat a variety of fresh, brightly-colored fruits and vegetables. The vegetables can be dark green as well. These colors indicate that the produce is full of antioxidants and vitamins, giving you the most nutritious bang for every bite.

- **Lean and mean:** Choose low-fat and lean versions of meats and dairy products. In addition, tofu and other soy products are great sources of protein.

- **Finicky about fat:** Make sure the majority of fat in your diet comes from fish, nuts, and vegetable oils. These fats are the unsaturated fats they’re liquid at room temperature and will not raise your cholesterol or increase your risk of heart disease. Saturated fats are solid at room temperature, raise cholesterol, and increase your risk of heart disease. These fats should be limited and include butter, stick margarine, lard, and the white streaks of fat in many fatty meats.

Some other ways to spice up your diet, even when you're in a rush, can also include:

- **Shakin' it up:** Make a fruit shake with bananas, yogurt, soy or dairy milk, wheat germ, and frozen berries.

- **Pita packer:** Hummus (a chickpea and sesame puree spread and dip) in a pita or whole-grain bread with sliced vegetables and cheese can provide you with protein, fiber, phosphorus, and zinc.

- **Nuts about nuts:** Nuts are full of healthy fats (the unsaturated ones listed above), protein, and minerals. They’re also easy to eat and require little preparation or clean-up, so grab a handful next time you’re on the go.

- **Putting the deli in delicious:** Adding low-salt and low-fat deli meat, such as sliced turkey, sliced chicken, or tuna, to your sandwiches or meals helps boost the protein content of your diet while giving you a healthy shot of selenium, phosphorus, and chromium. If you’re vegetarian, tofu is a good substitute that provides many of the same minerals.

- **Just juice:** Drinking a glass of juice in the morning (or any other time of day) is a quick and easy way to get some of the vitamins you need. Watch out for juices that are naturally high in sugar though (e.g., orange, apple, and grape juice). These juices should be limited to one or two eight-ounce servings per day. Low-sodium tomato juice or V-8 can give you some of the vitamins you need without all the sugar or sodium, and they can be enjoyed more frequently.

Remember, in order for all your hard working efforts to be fruitful, it can only help if your diet is fruit-filled and balanced, too!

Alice!
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