Dear Alice,

Could the birth control pill be causing my weird food cravings?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Food cravings are caused by many things — stress, mood changes, hormone fluctuations, and even just the sight of a specific food can cause you to salivate. But, contrary to popular belief, science has not linked food cravings to birth control pill usage.

There are a lot of myths that similarly connect birth control pills and weight gain. Understanding how birth control pills work helps to debunk those myths. Birth control pills work by balancing hormone levels, which stops your menstrual cycle and prevents ovulation, making pregnancy very unlikely. Hormone fluctuations are more often responsible for food cravings. A lot of people experience these hormone induced cravings during pregnancy, when hormones shift a lot. While some increases and decreases in appetite may occur with birth control pill usage, this experience is not consistent. Most weight gain experienced by people on the pill is likely a result of existing exercise and eating habits, not the pill itself.

Food cravings are actually the most predictable in relation to stress level. Upsetting thoughts, fatigue, and other types of stress are interpreted in your body as threats and cause your adrenal glands to release cortisol. This release of cortisol sends a message to your liver that your body needs glucose (sugar). This is part of your body’s fight or flight response when your body experiences a stressor, it engages those fight or flight instincts by preparing to use available glucose for energy. Your body will first use available sources of glucose, and then, if the stressor continues, glucose levels become depleted, and you will crave sweets and carbs — the types of food easily converted to glucose. This interplay of psychological and physiological responses can often catch people in a vicious cycle of cravings. In addition to lowering stress, eating foods higher in protein can help reduce the dramatic changes in blood sugar levels and the severity of cravings.
If you’re concerned about changes in your food cravings, appetite, or potential side effects of your birth control, discussing your observations with your health care provider can help get to the root of what may be causing the changes you have noticed. You can also learn more about healthy eating resources through Alice! Health Promotion’s nutrition initiatives [4].

Hope this helps!

Alice!
Category: Sexual & Reproductive Health [5]

Related questions
Birth control pills and weight gain [6]
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Resources
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