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. Relatively balanced meals, possibly planned by parents who were watching out for their children's health, are replaced by a smorgasbord of dining hall offerings. And while the "First-Year 15" are largely a myth (most college students don't gain 15 pounds, or any weight, during their first year), having unlimited access to a variety of foods the first year of college is a new challenge for many students.

The foods that you mention ? pizza, Chinese food, and tacos ? are not inherently unhealthy. Each contains foods from important food groups and provides energy that will fuel your brain during long study sessions. Sometimes these foods are prepared in such a way that they are high in fat, which is a nutrient that helps us to feel full, but also provides extra calories. These foods can be part of a filling and balanced meal, but only if they share the plate with side dishes that are low in fat, high in fiber, and nutrient dense.
One easy tip for healthy "all you care to eat" dining: When you place food on your lunch or dinner plate, make sure half the plate is filled with different colored steamed, grilled, broiled, or raw vegetables. One fourth of the plate should contain lean proteins, such as beans, grilled skinless chicken, or baked skinless fish. The remaining fourth of the plate can hold whole grains, such as 100 percent whole wheat bread or brown rice. For example, in order to balance a plate that includes pizza, choose 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 one taco with the meaty, cheesy, or beany filling of your choice and fill up the rest of your plate with steamed or grilled veggies and brown rice. For flavor fiends, look around for condiments like hot sauce, mustard, fresh salsa, and other seasonings. More information on dividing up your plate can be found on the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) MyPlate website [2].

If you find yourself stuffed after a dining hall meal, here's another tip: Fill only one plate and don't go back for seconds. You could even skip using a tray, to avoid filling too many plates and grabbing too many calorie-rich beverages. If you're still hungry after letting your food settle, grab some fruit; high in fiber and deliciously sweet, fruit can be a filling and satisfying second course. 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, but it's likely there are plenty of grilled, steamed, baked, or broiled veggies and proteins and whole grain carbs to fill your plate. Healthy dining options to look out for include:

- A salad bar
- Whole grain bread and/or bagels near the toaster
- Entree options without any breading
- Cooked veggies without any 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 from the soda machines
- A choice in plate, bowl, and cup size

For recommendations tailored to individual dietary needs, food experiences, and taste preferences, you can meet with a registered dietitian. The staff at the dining hall are also a great resource, as they are familiar with the menus. They may be able to answer your questions regarding foods that are prepared in a healthier manner, and the concerns of other students trying to eat a balanced diet.

Bon appétit!

Alice!

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Published date:
Feb 18, 2005
Last reviewed on:
May 06, 2014

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