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 say that the superior nutrition afforded by cooking our food is what has allowed our brains and bodies to develop the amazing complexities that they have. Others think 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.

Many people who follow a raw diet — a diet composed primarily of uncooked fruits, vegetables, sprouts, nuts, seeds, grains, and beans — do report experiencing increased energy, improved skin appearance, better digestion, weight loss, and reduced incidence of heart disease. However there are probably just as many people who would claim that a raw diet made them feel lethargic, hungry, cold, and/or deficient in crucial vitamins and minerals. There are pros and cons of a raw diet, as with almost any diet you could come up with. The most important thing is to figure out what feels right for your body, lifestyle, climate, and nutritional needs, all of which may change throughout your life.

The main tenet of a raw food diet is to avoid cooking foods above 118 degrees Fahrenheit, the theory being that keeping 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 can render them full of enzymes, fully digestible, and high in proteins, vitamins, fats, and minerals. Fruits and vegetables can also be dehydrated into breads and cookies, blended into warm (under 118 F degrees) soups, and juiced. Because the raw food diet consists mainly of fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds, beans, grains, legumes, seaweed, fresh juices, and purified water, it contains fewer transfats and saturated fats than the typical Western diet. A raw foods diet is
also high in fiber, potassium, magnesium, folate, and health-promoting plant chemicals called phytochemicals.

Another advantage raw foods promoters cite is the diet's alkalizing effect on the blood. The more alkaline human blood, the more oxygen it absorbs. The more oxygen our blood absorbs, the better we feel. If our blood can't absorb enough oxygen we feel tired, gain weight, have poor digestion, develop aches, pains, and may develop conditions like cancer, heart disease, arthritis, and candida. The most alkalizing foods are raw dark green vegetables? especially leafy green vegetables like kale, collards, and chard; fruits like watermelon, avocado, cucumber, and young coconuts; herbs and spices like wheatgrass, parsley, basil, cilantro, cayenne, ginger; and sprouts made from mung bean and alfalfa. The opposite of alkalizing foods are acidic foods, which are mostly sugar, coffee and tea, animal products, white flour and other processed foods like cereal and baked goods, and transfats and saturated fats. Some believe that stress and environmental toxins also produce acidity in the blood. An easy way to determine your blood pH level is to buy a pH test strip at any health food store, pee on it, and read the results to tell how alkaline or acidic you are. While followers may be fervent about the benefits of going raw, there are few to no scientific, population-based studies backing up claims of significant health benefits.

Some critics of a raw food diet suggest that the body makes the enzymes needed to digest and assimilate food nutrients, and that, though you do lose some vitamins and minerals when cooking, there's nothing inherently wrong with cooking foods. In fact, cooking some foods allows our bodies to more easily digest their proteins, and makes certain nutrients more available to our systems for absorption. For example, lycopene, a plant chemical, is found in greater abundance in cooked tomato products than in raw ones. Cooking also helps to destroy certain bacteria and food-borne illnesses.

Other critiques associated with this diet are that it lacks calcium, iron, protein and vitamin B12. To avoid nutrient deficiency, strict raw foodists take supplements of vitamin B12, vitamin D, and drink herb teas like raspberry leaf and nettles to fortify the body with iron and calcium. By eating adequate amounts of sprouted beans, nuts, and seeds, raw food lovers can consume enough protein. Nausea, cravings, and headaches, which are symptoms of the body's detoxification, can occur as a result of starting a raw diet. Detox symptoms are especially likely to occur if a person's previous diet was rich in meat, sugar, and caffeine. With time (and drinking plenty of water) these symptoms usually go away. A strictly raw food diet might not be suitable for pregnant or nursing women, babies and young children, people with anemia, people at risk for osteoporosis, and those who live in very cold climates, although these people can certainly incorporate raw foods into their diets. As with any eating plan, considerable energy, time, thought, and commitment is necessary in order to maintain a healthy and balanced lifestyle as a raw-foodie.

With diets, one size does not fit all. There is no one diet that will serve everyone the same; there probably isn't even one diet that will serve one person for very long. If you're a Columbia student and want more individualized guidance on optimal nutrition, you can make an appointment with a nutritionist at Medical Services [2] through Open Communicator [3] or by calling x4-2284. Non-Columbia students may want to start with a primary care provider who can help them find a nutritionist. You can examine what a raw diet entails, how to carry it out healthfully, and common pitfalls to avoid, but ultimately you will have to decide for yourself if it feels good to keep it raw one day a week, one week a month, one month a year, or hardly ever. Rawk on!
frozen-and-fresh-veggies