Dear Alice,

My friend and I are two oversized male teenagers. We have tried many diets, but cannot keep them for too long. Is there some kind of loophole or trick that is a lot easier? I bet you're in shape!

Love,

Big and Chunky brothers

Answer

Dear Big and Chunky brothers,

The big secret that a lot of people have been slowly learning is that most restrictive diets don't work in the long run. Being on a diet usually makes people hungry, tired, cranky, frustrated, depressed, deprived, annoyed, and anxious. Sounds like a recipe for failure, huh? The key to eating a balanced diet is to be mindful of what you are eating and how much you are eating. Aim to eat a generally healthy diet, but allow yourself to follow your cravings without guilt. Moderation is key.

So, what's a teen to do? First, take a look at your lifestyle. Are you sitting in front of a computer, TV, or video game system most of the time? You need to get up and get your body in motion! Having a friend with the same concerns is helpful, because being active is more fun with someone else. Make a list of things you could do together. Some ideas to get you started include:

- Playing some sport outside
- Enthusiastic walking
- Riding bikes
- Walking up stairs
- Getting off at an earlier bus or subway stop and walking the rest of the way

Second, identify your usual eating routine. For many people, it's almost automatic to snack while working and studying, reading, or watching television. Hunger doesn't even matter. This is a pattern of eating that can be hard to break. Trying to be more mindful of what, when, and how much you eat is a good way to start. Set out to eat only when you're hungry, rather than for entertainment. If you are hungry (and it is okay and even helpful to eat between meals),
take a few moments to sit and have a snack. Instead of eating out of a bag, box, or container, put out a set amount on a plate or in a bowl. Healthy snack ideas include vegetables and hummus, an apple and an ounce of cheese, or a rice cake with nut butter. When you are done eating, move to the next activity.

Eating three regular meals a day can make a difference. If you're a breakfast or lunch skipper, it may set the stage for you to get too hungry and overeat at some point later in the day. You can build healthy meals by:

- Including at least one fruit (e.g., apple, orange, pear) or non-starchy vegetable (e.g., leafy greens, broccoli, carrots) at every meal.
- Incorporating one food that is a good source of protein: low- or non-fat dairy (e.g., milk, yogurt, cheese); soy (e.g., tofu, soy milk); lean meat, chicken, fish; legumes (e.g., beans, lentils, and split peas) or nuts.
- Making half of all of your grains whole ones (that's a minimum of one meal or snack), and including items such as whole grain breads or cereals, brown rice, or whole grain pasta.
- Cutting down on fat. Although some fat in your eating plan is healthy, it's a concentrated source of calories that can add up quickly. Making French fries out of a potato adds over 20 grams of fat and almost 200 calories, while a plain baked potato has less than one gram of fat and 220 calories. Choose fried foods infrequently and opt for baked, broiled, grilled, roasted, or steamed items instead.

The quantity of food you are eating is also a component in managing your weight. This doesn't mean that you have to go hungry. Rather, tune in to the portion sizes you are eating. Do you feel overly stuffed after eating? Are you truly hungry when you start eating? Perhaps you could be satisfied with smaller sized meals and snacks. Soft drinks are another source of excess calories for many teens. One can of soda or pop has 150 calories, all from sugar. Drinking a liter a day could add over 3,000 calories to a person's weekly intake, or nearly one extra pound of weight. If this sounds like you, try cutting down, or switching to flavored seltzer or water. Look to whole foods, rather than processed ones, to supply your meals and snacks as often as possible.

Hopefully this answer has given you some "food for thought." Although there aren't any shortcuts to good health, increasing your awareness of your eating patterns is a good start.

Alice!

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