Hungrier and hungrier

Dear Alice,

I've read a lot lately about midnight snacking and late night eating and obesity and calorie worries, but my problem lies in the opposite direction ? I'm LOSING weight, and insatiably hungry, day and night! The only advice I get is, “Eat healthy,” which is preaching to the choir, since I consume more fresh produce, mostly vegetables, and home-cook all my own meals. At a recent nutrition check-up, the nutritionist patted me on the back in congratulations for having one of the healthiest lifestyles he’s seen, and shrugged at my inexplicable hunger. The fact is, I'm in the kitchen every other hour, and my body doesn't differentiate between awake and asleep anymore when it comes to hunger. I go to bed on a full stomach, and wake up every three hours to eat again. It's exhausting! I'm falling asleep during the day ? but never more than an hour, because hunger strikes. And amid all this, my grocery bill climbs and my weight drops. I don't get it. What am I doing wrong?

Hungry

Answer

Dear Hungry,

When it comes to weight, the two factors to pay attention to are calories consumed and calories burned. If you consume more calories than you burn, you will gain weight and vice versa. The problem here is either that you are not consuming enough calories or your body is somehow not making the best use of them. Before we get into the biological possibilities, try a quick dietetic experiment.

With all the media surrounding diets and obesity, it may be easy to get the wrong idea about what constitutes "healthy." Eating a lot of vegetables as you do is great (and a vital component of a healthy diet) but vegetables are low in calories and many don't contain fat or protein, both nutrients your body needs. When you feel those hunger pains, consider grabbing a snack or a meal that combines all of these, such as a salad with chicken (lean protein), avocado (healthy fat and a fruit!), and low-fat ranch dressing. Including more healthy fats (limit trans and saturated fats) and lean proteins (also found in seafood, dairy, and nuts) in your diet may help you feel fuller longer and will also add more healthy calories into your diet.

If this doesn't curb your appetite, there may be other factors affecting your hunger sensors, which a health care provider may help identify. Some questions to ask yourself are whether you've been feeling increased anxiety, if you've recently started or changed medications, or if
you've experienced increased thirst, heart palpitations, or a need to urinate. These may be signs of hunger-causing conditions such as:

- Anxiety and other mental conditions
- The use of drugs such as corticosteroids and anti-depressants
- An overactive thyroid gland (hyperthyroidism)
- Diabetes
- Grave's Disease

List adapted from The National Institutes of Health [2].

If you experience nausea or vomiting along with your insatiable hunger, that may be a sign that you have a parasite (such as tapeworm) in your digestive track. That possibility brings a whole new meaning to "eating for two." In the related Q&As, you may want to read more about parasites as well as other conditions that could explain your hunger. Regardless of the cause of your insatiability, though, if you lose more than ten pounds or five percent of your bodyweight unexpectedly or if weight loss persists, consider contacting a health care provider to get to the bottom of the issue?and your bottomless stomach.

Whatever the cause of your endless appetite, hopefully this has sated your hunger for an answer. Eat up!

Alice!
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Nutrition & Physical Activity [3]
Optimal Nutrition [4]
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Resources

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