Helping a friend to eat healthier [1]

Dear Alice,

I have a friend who drinks nothing but Diet Pepsi, eats foods such as top ramen, Triscuits, processed cheese spreads, bbq potato chips, microwaveable dinners, and fast foods. What kind of health problems will she have from this kind of diet? She's always been overweight and her version of exercise is walking to the mailbox. How can I help her change her eating habits?

? In a quandary

Answer

Dear In a quandary,

Clearly, you?re a very caring friend and want the people you care about to be as healthy as possible. To answer your first question, diets that are high in fat, sodium, and calories, and low in fruits, veggies, calcium, and other nutrients ? in addition to lower levels of physical activity ? may contribute to the development of diseases and conditions, such as heart disease, diabetes, hypertension, and osteoporosis, among others. If this is a concern to your friend, she may consider changing her patterns. And, while this is a great concern to have, it?s one that is mostly out of your control to address ? it?s her decision alone about what to eat and whether to be physically active. However, the choices you make, particularly around her, may be a positive influence on her future health-related decisions. Keep reading for more on what the research has to say about it and some ways you can model healthy behaviors that your friend might want to mimic moving forward.

There?s a good amount of research out there that has explored the role friends and peers can play in the eating and physical activity behaviors of others. When it comes to food choice and the amount of food to eat, folks who know each other and eat together are more likely to eat the same types of foods (particularly the ones you?ve described that are ?highly-palatable?) and in similar amounts. To say it in a different way, people tend to model the eating behaviors and norms established by those around them. Moreover, it?s been found that what others actually do, rather than what a person thinks others feel they should do, is more likely to influence a person?s eating behavior. So, if a friend eats more or has a second helping in a sitting, you may be more likely to eat a bit extra at the same time, too. This is something most people do without thinking too much about it in general, though some studies have found that women and those who have specific eating goals (e.g., dieting to lose weight) are more likely
to model the eating behaviors of their peers. Research has also found that friends play an influential role as far as being active is concerned. By way of sharing encouragement and actually being active together, friends can help friends increase their levels of physical activity.

So, what does all this mean for you and your pal? Going the route of being an example might be your best bet, rather than giving any type of lecture or nagging your buddy about her diet and lack of physical activity. In fact, this may be your chance to be a healthy trendsetter. She may be more likely to follow your lead as you continue to make healthy choices and encourage her to do the same. Consider these ideas to help set up some healthy norms for your next hang out session:

- **Cue some culinary creativity.** Look for a new, healthy recipe to try out and invite your friend over to prepare and eat it with you.
- **Head over to a healthy eatery for a friendly feast.** Search for a restaurant in your area that offers healthy options. Once you’ve perused the menu, see if your pal might be interested in sharing a few tasty appetizers or an entrée with you.
- **Plan a fresh produce shopping spree together.** Visit your local farmer’s market or co-op to get fresh fruits and veggies? bonus points if you can get there by walking or biking together.
- **Make your friend-date an active one.** Focus on the fun and find a nearby spot to hike, bike, or play a favorite sport. Perhaps there’s a park in your neighborhood that you could explore together or ask her to join you for a free yoga or fitness class.
- **Bond with your buddy while working towards a shared goal.** Hoping to train for a fun run race in the near future? Ask your friend if she’d consider training for it with you. That way you can cheer each other on, keep one another accountable, and celebrate your success across the finish line together.

Remember, gentle suggestions and words of encouragement will likely be better received than harsh criticism. And, even despite your best efforts, she may decide not to pursue any changes at this time. If this is the case, you can express your concern to your friend, suggest helpful resources, and let her know that if she would ever like to make changes and improvements that you’re ready to support her. In the meantime, remember why you’re friends in the first place and enjoy your time together!

Alice!

Category:
**Nutrition & Physical Activity** [2]
**Optimal Nutrition** [3]
**Healthy Eating** [4]
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**Related questions**

- Eating poorly, no exercise, and feeling bad about it! [7]
- How can I eat well at college? [8]
- How to choose/use exercise DVDs [9]
- I'm bored, so I eat [10]

**Resources**