Dear Alice,

I have a job that is largely sedentary -- mostly sitting in an office in front of a computer. My partner's work is very physically active. Since we've been living together, food and nutrition have increasingly become a source of stress and conflict. He needs big meals with lots of protein and calories, and I need better portion control with lots of vegetables. We're having real problems with shopping and menu planning. Since we've been living together, I've been gaining weight and he's been losing! Can you give us any advice or direct us to information on how to live and eat together while addressing both of our nutritional needs?

Thanks, the Pounds Thief

Answer

Dear the Pounds Thief,

Kudos to both of you for trying to maintain healthy eating patterns during the major life transition of moving in together! Your question seems to indicate that you two have different nutritional needs, but not wildly different diets. The good news is that your nutritional needs may not be as different as you think; what will vary more are your daily caloric requirements. The other good news is that partners who have very different diets move in together all the time: vegans with carnivorous dairy lovers, gluten-free and gluten-loving people, diabetics with non-diabetics, pescatarians with vegetarians. You get the idea. So you're in good company as you try to figure this all out.

Two primary factors determine one's caloric needs: body size and activity level. Sedentary people (regardless of gender) need about 13 calories per pound of body weight per day. Moderately active people need about 16 calories for every pound per day, and very active people should boost that amount to about 18. People tend to over-estimate how much protein they need. As a general rule, people of any activity level and gender and size need only 15 percent of their daily calories to be from proteins. Excess protein can decrease calcium absorption and cause calcium to be lost in the urine. Excess protein is also stored as fat, so it can contribute to weight gain from fat, not only muscle. Excess protein can also cause kidney stones. Typically 6-8 ounces of meat will cover it, less if you are eating other protein rich foods like beans and some cheeses.

Approximately 45-65 percent of your daily calories should be from carbohydrates. The more fiber in those sources, the better. It's also great if your carbohydrates are coming from dark
leafy greens like kale and spinach, because these will also have lots of iron and B vitamins.

Fat consumption should be below 30-35 percent of your total caloric intake (or 20-25 percent if weight loss is a concern). Try to avoid trans fats (found in some types of margarine, fried foods at restaurants, and store-bought snacks). And try to have more mono-unsaturated fats (avocados, olive oil, flax, fish) than saturated fats (found in dairy, vegetable oil, and meats).

Couples with different caloric or dietary needs may need to do a bit more planning and be more intentional about their menus than others. There is no rule that says you have to eat exactly the same items at the same time and in the same amounts. Here are some tips to help with meal times:

- If you’re worried about portion control, try to be mindful of how much you put on your plate at a time. People often feel compelled to finish what’s on their plate, even if they are no longer hungry. Try loading your plate with less and then going back for more if you’re still hungry.
- Try to keep fewer unhealthy snacks in the house. If they aren’t there, you’re less likely to consume the ‘empty calories’ from these snacks when you get hungry.
- Speaking of snacks, do you snack throughout the day? If not, consider trying it! People will eat less at meal times if they have been snacking some throughout the day. This also is easier on your metabolism and digestive system. Try keeping lots of healthy snacks around: whole grain breads, yogurt, granola, fruit, carrots, raisins, walnuts, and celery are all good, healthy, lean yet filling snack choices that will put a dent in your appetite by dinner.
- Along these same lines, don’t skip meals! This will make you hungrier by dinner and that’s when people are most likely to eat more than needed.
- Buy foods you both like and alternate nights cooking for each other. On the night your partner cooks for you, eat the foods you most prefer. If it is not quite enough for him, perhaps he can cook up a side dish to give him a little extra. On the night you cook for him, make him a meal he loves. If he doesn’t want veggies, cook up a side of veggies for yourself. This can be a great way to honor each other’s dietary preferences.
- Do you like cooking together? Consider taking a cooking class or checking out some recipes online that might incorporate food ingredients that you both would enjoy. Make it a fun project of discovery.

As you noted, having different activity levels and different dietary needs in the same household can be a source of stress. But, working through and honoring these differences can also strengthen a relationship. As the poet Rainer Maria Rilke said: ‘Once the realization is accepted that even between the closest human beings infinite distances continue, a wonderful living side by side can grow, if they succeed in loving the distance between them, which makes it possible for each to see the other whole against the sky.’

Here’s to love and food,

Alice!

Category:
Nutrition & Physical Activity
Relationships
Optimal Nutrition
Food Choices & Health
Relationship Stuff
Related questions

Ideal caloric intake? [8]
Partner is bulimic? what can I do to help her and myself? [9]
What's more important: Calories or fat grams? [10]
Do bodybuilders and other weightlifters need more protein? [11]
Good vs. bad fats [12]
Love shack! Time to move in together? [13]

Published date:
Mar 30, 2012
Links