Dear Alice,

I feel I am getting fat, am eating poorly, and not getting enough exercise. I feel generally unhealthy. I have no time for exercise. Though I'm in physical education, the only class that fit into my schedule was yoga. This is a great form of meditation, but I'm unhappy with my body shape. I have to eat in the cafeterias, and I try to eat healthy, but I'm always hungry, especially late at night, and tend to go to inexpensive diners, where the food is not exactly first rate, and I order too much (such as tonight), and consequently feel ill, full, greasy, and like I'm going to sleep with it all in my system ? yuck!

I'm a vegetarian. I don't eat very poorly, but I'm still getting flabby. I want to exercise but either have too much to do, forget about it, have no time, am too worried about stuff, etc., and I don't really know what or how to exercise to tone up and feel good. I know that if I exercise, I'll feel better about myself, eat healthier, etc. I refuse to diet. It's such a waste of time and I know it's worse for me than anything else. What can I do?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Your feelings are certainly valid; sometimes though, it?s helpful to remember that you may be harder on yourself than you need to be. It sounds like you?re aware of what you need to do to, but are looking for ways to fit it in to your schedule. The good news is that you don?t have to do everything at once. Making a series of small changes over time may allow you to take a more holistic approach to your physical activity and eating habits, thereby implementing a sustained lifestyle change.

First, a bit about a nutritious diet: the Dietary Guidelines for Americans [2] from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) emphasizes a focus on building a healthier eating style [3], which outlines eating a variety of foods and minimizing the amount of saturated fat, sodium, and added sugars. While that seems like a lot to do at once, taking small steps and building on it over time is encouraged. For a balanced vegetarian diet, it?s good to choose a variety of grains: brown rice, breads (whole grain [4] when possible), pasta, cereals, and bulgur. Beans and peas ? such as kidney, pinto, lentils, chickpeas ? are great non-meat protein [5] sources. This category also includes plant-based proteins such as tofu and tempeh, which may be available in some meal choices at your school's cafeteria. Fruits and veggies are also a critical source of vitamins and minerals. And, if you consume dairy products, eat them in moderation
or try low-fat or nonfat varieties.

You also mentioned that you tend to get hungry and eat more than you’d like late at night. Avoiding heavier meals before going to bed is wise, because they can impact your sleep quality. Have you tried eating several smaller meals over the course of the day? Doing this may allow you feel satisfied, without getting too hungry at any particular point in the day. If you’re busy most days and can’t get to the cafeteria, try keeping snacks tucked in your bag with you? granola bars or whole fruits are easily portable options. You might also try keeping a few healthier bites in your room instead of going to the cafeteria or to a diner late at night. Consider keeping some peanut butter and crackers or plain yogurt on hand for those late (but not too late) night snacks. These foods may not only help you feel full and satisfied, but they may also help promote sleep (foods high in sugar or fiber can make it harder to fall or stay asleep). If you continue to struggle with your eating habits, you might consider talking with a registered dietician to create a tailored plan of action.

As you know, eating a balanced diet is only part of the challenge. Making time for physical activity is critical, too. It’s recommended that adults get 150 minutes of moderate intensity or 75 minutes of vigorous intensity physical activity each week along with two days of strength-training activity. Doing so will help not only with maintaining a healthy weight, but also with staving off a whole host of health conditions. If you feel like you don’t have time to formally integrate some intentional movement into your schedule, both walking and climbing stairs are a great way to get your heart pumping without taking up extra time (if you’re able). It’s also good to keep in mind that breaking a sweat can be done by breaking up the time you move into as little as ten minute increments. Perhaps part of the motivation equation might be having a partner to get moving with you. Maybe you and a friend can sign up for a gym class together and encourage each other to go; or, the two of you can agree to work out together twice a week.

It sounds like you’re already on the right track based on your question. As a next step, you might consider making a plan and outline the ways you can follow through with it. It’s good to take it slow, and try not to get down on yourself if you miss a workout or veer outside of a balanced diet for a meal. If you continue to struggle with your weight and have trouble staying satiated, it might also be a good idea to talk with your health care provider to discuss it further and to rule out any underlying health issues that could be factoring into what you’re experiencing.

Best of luck!

Alice!

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Nutrition & Physical Activity
Optimal Nutrition
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Columbia Health Nutrition Services (Morningside) [20]
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