Dear Alice!

Soooooo my roommate keeps eating my food? How do I tell her to stop politely?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Living with a roommate, whether it’s family, a friend, or total stranger, almost always entails conflict at one point or another. But that's okay! Negotiating healthy boundaries with your roommate can be a great step toward making living together a positive experience for both people. While having a roommate who chows down on your grub can be frustrating, it’ll be worth talking with her about it and work together to find solutions to your current (and future) cohabitation woes.

If you haven’t done this already, seeing if you can dig up any details on what might be happening with your missing munchables may be a good place to start. Is it possible that your roomie didn’t have anything to do with it or do you have evidence to suggest she’s the culprit? If you’re not sure, getting some more information may also inform how you frame your conversation with her about it. Gathering this intel requires some detective work. Is there any pattern to your missing items? are they gone within similar time periods or is it always certain foods? Is it possible that you forgot that you ate the last of the chips that disappeared or tossed out your famous potato salad because it was past its prime? Are your food items clearly marked wherever they’re stored in shared spaces or are they only kept in a private area like your bedroom? Are there any other reasons why your groceries may have gone missing under your watch? If after collecting the information you still suspect your roommate or just need more information, it’s high time to speak with her about it.

If you feel you know enough to believe your roommate has been taking your grub, confronting her about it may be warranted but doing so doesn’t have to be aggressive. You can simply ask if she has taken or eaten your food. But, if you’re not quite whether your roommate has been eating your food, it’s wise to lead an inquiry with curiosity rather than immediately pointing fingers. In that case, you can ask her if she has noticed whether some of your food items have gone missing. In either scenario though, mention specific food items (was it your Manchego cheese or the wasabi peas that went missing?), from where they went missing, and when you noticed they were gone. With that information, your roommate may either fess up to having taken or eaten your food or will give you more information about what happened.
with it. Perhaps she was confused and assumed the items in question were hers or allowed someone who was visiting to eat the food. If she admits responsibility (for herself or her guests) you can simply ask that she stop or ask you before she eats your food. If your roommate gets offended, try to stay relaxed and explain that you aren’t angry and that you just don’t want it to happen again. If she denies that she ate your food, you may need to consider if there is another way that the food disappeared or have more concrete evidence before asking her again.

While it’s frustrating when your roomie has finished off your falafel or fruit snacks, there are some ways to help ensure that your food remains just for you. First, you may want to try designating areas of the refrigerator, cabinets, and shelves for each of you to store your edible goods. This can help ensure that your items aren’t mixed up and the other’s food isn’t unintentionally eaten. Another option to avoid unintentional mix-ups is to label all of your foods or keep what you can secure in your bedroom or in a separate personal refrigerator (which could be especially helpful if the previous strategies don’t help your situation). If you feel those strategies won’t cut it, you may decide to only shop for the groceries you plan to eat in a day in order to ensure that your roommate doesn’t have access to your uneaten food.

Additionally, you may want to talk about how to handle similar conflicts in the future. In cases like these, setting some expectations up front can save you and those you live with headaches down the line. If you don’t have one already, working together to come up with a roommate agreement can help you establish living guidelines and navigate future conflicts, even if it’s been a while since you and your roommate started living together. These agreements can cover topics such as when to have guests over, who buys various household supplies, and other living concerns. You can also include not eating each other’s food in the arrangement. If you already have one of these agreements, you may want to suggest revisiting it to discuss whether or not the agreements are being met and whether or not the content needs to be adapted.

If none these tactics work, or you would just be more comfortable with another person to mediate the discussion, you might want to select a person that both you and your roommate trust to help you both talk about this challenging issue. If your roommate still refuses to respect your boundaries, you may want to consider whether or not you want to modify your living situation by moving out or figuring out how you might be able to get a new roommate.

Alice!
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