

# Ask our Experts...



## Amelia Freer

Amelia Freer is a nutritional therapist who gives realistic, practical and achievable advice to improve wellness.

**Q** I try to eat healthy meals, but during the day, my blood sugar levels drop and I get tired and anxious. Can you suggest some healthy snacks to eat between meals that will keep me going?

*Elizabeth, Whitstable*

**A** If you're eating a good source of protein at each meal, along with some vegetables and a little bit of fruit (with meals, not alone), then your blood sugar levels are less likely to fall and cause those energy dips and sugar cravings.

However, if you're consuming large amounts of caffeine and sugary foods throughout the day – such as yoghurts with a high sugar content, sugary breakfast cereals, muffins, white bread or biscuits – then your blood sugar levels are more likely to drop in between. This leads to a vicious cycle of craving sugar, feeling tired and anxious and reaching for more sugary foods to give you a boost. I'm convinced that if you start your day on sugar, you'll end your day on sugar, and you'll almost certainly have that classic mid-afternoon energy slump.

I don't advocate snacking at all to my clients, unless their diet is very high in sugar and refined produce, in which case they need snacks initially to help stabilise their blood sugar levels.

However, if you're eating well and you still feel the need for a snack, the key is to combine protein with carbohydrates. My favourite is sliced apple with nut butter. You can also try linseeds with avocado; cucumber and cherry tomatoes with hummus; or a piece of fruit with eight almonds or cashew nuts.

If you avoid drinking caffeine and ensure you have protein at every meal, you'll be amazed by how much your energy levels could improve.



**Q** When I'm working late, I don't have time to cook from scratch. Are there any convenience foods that you consider healthy?  
*Kerry, Edinburgh*

**A** When it comes to convenience foods, any claim of being 'healthy' on the packet usually means it isn't! So take a good look at the label. If the ingredients list is short and you can pronounce the items, then it's probably a good option.

From the high street, I find Cruss has the healthiest options. They offer brown rice with curry, and a variety

of salad options. Otherwise, all supermarkets sell cooked salmon, smoked mackerel or cooked prawns, which are all nutritious options to add to a salad or vegetables, with no cooking required.

If you want something hot, steaming is healthy and quick. Try steaming a salmon fillet and vegetables, and add some Waitrose Spicy Thai Mix. It's tasty and takes less than 10 minutes to prepare.

For time saving, I have a rule of 'cook once, eat twice' (or more). So when you do have time to cook, prepare several portions and freeze the rest for when you're busy. Soups and stews work particularly well.

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# We're here to help

**Q** I'm still not clear on whether, as a vegetarian, I'm getting all the nutrients I need. I've read there are eight essential amino acids that you get from protein and I've heard there's one you can only get from meat sources. I'd like to know if that's true and if it really matters. Also, if I eat fish, will that help?

*Simone, Brighton*

**A** Don't worry, you can get all eight of the essential amino acids (isoleucine, leucine, lysine, methionine, phenylalanine, threonine, tryptophan and valine) from a vegetarian diet, as long as you eat a wide variety of wholegrains, eggs, pulses, nuts and seeds.

I only encourage my clients to go vegetarian if they're really committed to eating well and take it seriously. Unfortunately, I meet far too many unhealthy vegetarians who exist on bread and cheese, but believe that they are eating a healthier diet by avoiding meat.

It's important to ensure that an adequate amount of vegetarian proteins are eaten at each meal instead – dairy, nuts, seeds, pulses, eggs, sea vegetables and soya are all healthy options. There are also some great vegetarian protein powders – such as hemp, pea or rice – which are a brilliant way to maintain protein levels in your diet.

What's more, if you are happy to include the occasional portion of fresh-water fish as part of your meals, then I think that would be a healthy addition. However, it's not essential.

**Q** Can I get all the vitamins and minerals I need from my diet or do I need to take supplements, too? My sister buys spirulina and probiotics. Would I benefit from taking these?  
*Harriet, London*

**A** I also love spirulina (a nutrient-rich blue-green algae) and add it to my smoothie each day along with

lots of other goodies. But every person is different and will have unique nutritional needs, so without knowing your specific health requirements, I can't say for certain which supplements would be beneficial for you.

However, I do now find that very few people eat a perfect diet. And due to the way our food is grown, processed and transported, it's becoming more

difficult to get all the nutrients we need purely from our diet. Supplements can help to improve or enhance your health, but they're not a substitute for a balanced, healthy diet, so deal with that area first before you start adding them into your diet.

However, if you regularly feel run down or are lacking in energy, you may want to ask your GP to send you for blood tests to see if

you're deficient in any particular vitamins or minerals. If you are deficient, treatment is usually straightforward, involving either supplements or injections to give your levels a boost.

I would then suggest that you seek out the advice of a nutritional therapist, so you can receive a supplement plan that is safe and specific to your nutritional needs. ♦

**Q** There's been a lot in the news lately about magnesium being important for your bones. Is this true?

*Davina, Cardiff*

**A** Magnesium is one of the most essential nutrients required for health, but it's often ignored. Like vitamin D, magnesium helps to regulate calcium levels and it plays an equally important role in bone health.

Magnesium is also essential for maintaining normal muscle and nerve function, as well as keeping your immune system healthy. It can also have a calming effect and help you sleep better. Plus, it's considered beneficial for cardiovascular health and lowering blood pressure.

Foods that contain high levels of magnesium are dark green leafy vegetables, Brazil nuts, almonds, brown rice and even dark chocolate! To ensure that you're getting enough magnesium in your diet, eat lots of fresh vegetables, fruits, lean proteins, nuts, seeds and wholegrains. Magnesium deficiency can lead to muscle spasms, diabetes and migraines, among other problems, so taking supplements can be beneficial. Key symptoms to look out for include muscle cramps, constipation and insomnia.

