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You Ask! We Answer...

Eat right to prevent belly bloat. BY ALICIA REWEGA

Q *I stick to a clean diet for the most part, and most mornings I wake up with a nice flat belly. But as soon as I eat something, whether it is a bowl of cereal or a salad, I'm immediately bloated! How can I avoid "belly bloat" especially if I've got a special occasion coming up?*

— ELLEN, VIA EMAIL

A This is one of our most frequently asked reader questions.

Assuming that you are not overweight, just trying to avoid the bulge that often follows a meal, there are several foods that have a higher "bloat factor" than others.

Cruciferous vegetables such as broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage, radishes and brussels sprouts are all culprits. According to Gloria Tsang, RD, founder of Healthcastle.com, the largest online nutrition community run by dietitians, the reason cruciferous vegetables, and even beans, cause belly inflation is because they contain something called raffinose. "Raffinose is a type of complex sugar that is harder to metabolize in the upper general intestine and small intestines," she says. Fruit, for the most part, is OK and should keep you swell-free,

but stay away from dried varieties, like trail mix. It has been shriveled down to as small as one-tenth its original size but still packs the same fibrous punch, which means you eat a lot more of it to feel full.

Also, if you're not used to eating a high-fiber diet and you consume a fiber-dense meal you can be sure your midsection will balloon. "Gas and bloating will be a bi-product of eating a fiber-rich meal if your body is not used to it," Tsang confirms. Another offender is sodium. "A high-sodium meal or diet will also cause bloating because excess sodium draws water and we also get more thirsty after a salty meal, therefore we drink more water."

And if you think you're doing your tummy a favor by chewing sugar-free gum, Tsang says think again. Not only are you swallowing air causing your tummy to

expand but also, "Artificial sweeteners contain sugar alcohols such as sorbitol and xylitol and other ingredient that ends in 'tol' and it has been repeatedly proven that these sugar alcohols produce bloating."

Another thing that could be causing a larger-than-normal belly is if you're lactose intolerant but don't know it.

Fruit, for the most part, is OK and should keep you swell-free, but stay away from dried varieties.

This happens more commonly in men, but it certainly does occur in women, Tsang informs. And don't forget to chew your food. "Your food needs to be mechanically broken down and coated with the lubrication of your saliva, which contains enzymes to help your food digest correctly," Tsang advises. "When you don't chew your food suf-

ficiently the stomach has to work harder to break the food down and your food is then forced to stay in the stomach longer than the regular two hours it should take to digest. The intestinal system is not equipped to sort and digest improperly chewed food and with this comes bloating."

The upshot: If you're looking to maintain a flat belly,

stay away from anything that is high in sodium, prepackaged, processed or deep-fried. For a few days prior to your special occasion avoid cruciferous vegetables, dried fruit, sugar-free chewing gum and artificially sweetened items. Be sure to chew your food well and drink plenty of water and green tea to flush your system.

Ask your question and have it answered here! Write to myfatquestion@oxygenmag.com.