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#BXNDZS**KCR LOT
L129AV 21301 1741
LISA DRAYER
APT 4H
301 E 79TH ST
NEW YORK

Eat Smart

Your Diet Questions Answered!

Eat for more energy, inner calm and better sex. **by Leah McLaughlin**

Q "I've heard that eating carbs can calm me down, but I've also read that they're essential for energy. Can you explain?"

A Your brain and muscles rely on glucose, a by-product of carbohydrates, for any activity—whether it's dreaming up your next big idea or lifting a 10-pound dumbbell. But your brain also uses glucose to synthesize serotonin, a neurotransmitter that produces a feeling of calmness. "For this reason, some people may find that they crave carbohydrates whenever they're agitated or stressed," says Lisa Drayer, R.D., a New York City-based dietitian. The bottom line, however, is that carbohydrates are your body's main source of fuel. "Doing without them will only make you feel more fatigued in the long run," says D. Milton Stokes, R.D., a culinary nutritionist.

Q "I'm looking for a low-sugar cereal that also tastes great. Any suggestions?"

A We're big fans of the basics—MultiGrain Cheerios (108 calories/six grams sugar per one-cup serving) and old-fashioned oatmeal (129 calories/zero grams sugar per cup). A handful of berries provides all the sweetness we need. Drayer's picks include Hi-Lo, a new super-crisp cereal from Organic Milling Corporation (organicmilling.com) that's available with strawberries, maple and pecans, or vanilla and almonds. Each variety has 90 calories and a gram of sugar per half-cup serving. She also likes Kashi GoLean (also one of Stokes's favorites), with just six grams of sugar and 140 calories per cup. GoLean's crisp puffed-grain nuggets taste like low-calorie pralines.

Kashi's Heart to Heart cereal is one of Stokes's picks. It has 110 calories and just five grams of sugar per three-fourths-cup serving, but each heart-shaped nugget is coated with a sweet glaze.

Q "Can eating too many fiber-packed foods ever be dangerous?"

A "Consuming more than 50 grams a day can impair absorption of certain minerals, like calcium, magnesium and iron. If you're starting to increase fiber in your diet, add it slowly," says Drayer. You need only about 28 grams of fiber per day to stave off disease and promote regular bowel function; eating five to nine servings of fruits and vegetables and three servings of whole grains per day will fulfill that requirement. If you're eating a primarily plant-based diet, plus lots of bran, you could go overboard.

Q "I just started taking antidepressants. How can I ward off weight gain?"

A Though researchers aren't completely sure why, weight gain is a common side effect with many types of antidepressant medications. It's smart to increase your exercise as a preventive measure; also, studies show that regular exercise can help regulate your mood. Drayer advises keeping a food journal for a few days before you start taking your prescription. "Continue making entries after you go on the medication, and peruse the pages if you notice any weight change," she suggests. "Then look for ways to downsize your portions." If you find that weight gain is a problem, discuss it with your doctor.

Q "Are there any foods or nutrients that can help boost my libido?"

A "Not really," says Drayer. "Some foods—like shellfish and chocolate—are rumored to help put you in the mood, but there's no scientific evidence to support the notion." A diet packed with plenty of plant-based foods and lean proteins could improve your overall cardiovascular health, which is the real secret to an active sex life. "Getting enough zinc is also important, because this mineral is essential for sperm and hormone production; the RDA for men is 11 milligrams and for women it's 8," says Stokes. A three-ounce serving of lobster, for instance, supplies 2.5 milligrams. Other good sources include beef and wheat germ. ■

