

THE
EVERYTHING
HEALTHY
LIVING SERIES

Nutrition: Breaking Bad Nutrition Habits

*The most important information
you need to improve your health*



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The Everything® Healthy Living Series
Nutrition: Breaking Bad Nutrition
Habits

*The most important information you need to
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Introduction

For more than 10 years, millions of readers have trusted the bestselling Everything series for expert advice and important information on health topics ranging from pregnancy and postpartum care to heart health, anxiety, and diabetes. Packed with the most recent, up-to-date data, Everything health guides help you get the right diagnosis, choose the best doctor, and find the treatment options that work for you.

The Everything Healthy Living Series books are concise guides, focusing on only the essential information you need. Whether you're looking for an overview of traditional and alternative migraine treatments, advice on starting a heart-healthy lifestyle, or suggestions for finding the right medical team, there's an Everything Healthy Living Book for you.

Nutrition

Food is everywhere. Every street has a restaurant, every event has a concession stand, and every commercial is dripping with cheese. Billboards, newspapers, and the Internet are constantly trying to sell you food. And you want to buy it. But is what's out there really something you need? Does it do your body any good? Is it making you healthy and strong? And what about the kids? How are they handling being inundated with constant food opportunities? Are they growing up healthy, lean, and fit? If they live in America, there's a good chance they aren't.

Poor nutrition is a growing problem in the United States. It's not that we don't have enough to eat. It's that we have too much of the wrong stuff to eat. You probably already know you should lay off the fast food and pick up an apple instead of that doughnut. But have you ever wondered what healthier foods could really do for you?

Did you know that eating the right carbohydrates can give you ongoing energy? Did you know that bright fruits and vegetables can help protect you against cancer? Did you know that eating right at an early age can protect kids from food allergies?

Food is fuel. It can be delicious fuel, but it can also be the wrong fuel. Like putting diesel fuel in a gasoline engine, people often choose the wrong food. Without the proper fuel and regular intervals throughout the day, you sputter and stall and will likely need a tuneup, or worse, a complete overhaul. Getting the right fuel is not mysterious, difficult, expensive, or time-consuming. The Everything Healthy Living Series: Nutrition will show you exactly what, when, and how much you need to eat to get back on the road to good health.

Focusing on lifestyle changes instead of following a specific diet is the ticket to achieving optimal health, decreasing your risk of illness, increasing your energy level, improving your quality of life and well-being, and reducing your medications. In this series, you'll find everything you need to know to get your family on the road to life-long good health.

If you'd like to learn more about nutrition, check out *The Everything Guide to Nutrition*, available in print (978-1-4405-1030-4) and eBook (978-1-6055-0536-7) formats.

Breaking Bad Habits

Poor nutrition is often a result of poor habits, developed throughout a lifetime, and encouraged by society. When you're caring for a family, it's especially important to have good eating habits, not only for yourself but also to provide a good example for your children. Poor eating habits can be kicked, but it won't happen overnight. The following section includes all the information you need to know to kick bad habits (like skipping breakfast) and maintain healthy habits going forward.

The Most Important Meal

After twelve hours without nourishment, your body needs a fresh supply in the morning. Your blood glucose needs replenishment so that it can furnish the rest of your body with energy. Your brain, especially, needs glucose, as it has no capacity to store it. Eating breakfast helps your concentration, your ability to problem solve, your strength, and your endurance. What's more, intake of nutrients in the morning helps to regulate the appetite throughout the day, increasing your chances of meeting your daily nutritional requirements.

Breakfast is especially important for kids. A healthy breakfast improves overall cognitive skills, including memory, which gives them an edge in test taking, attendance, and class participation. Kids that skip breakfast tend to be disinterested, irritable, and lack the focus needed to succeed in class. And because a large chunk of their daily nutrients is missing, they tend to visit the school nurse more often.

Helping children develop a breakfast habit is likely one of the very best ways that parents can ensure lifelong success for their offspring.

Fact

The Massachusetts School Nutrition Task Force reports a study in which students participating in school breakfast programs reported decreased trips to the school nurse, as well as increased math and reading scores, improved behavior, and attendance.

If that weren't enough to convince you to eat your breakfast, know that people who skip breakfast tend to be heavier. Hunger builds up as lunch approaches, and suddenly food is necessary, in any form. In this situation it is more common to throw caution to the wind and eat the first thing that presents itself. Overeating of the wrong foods is the result, and although the day is half over, the daily nutrient intake is far from half complete.

What's Your Excuse?

The general excuse for skipping the first meal of the day is lack of time. Busy lifestyles do not have to preclude health. You can eat a healthy breakfast in ten minutes or less if you plan for it. A bowl of cereal, a piece of fruit, and slice of toast is adequate.

Some people complain that breakfast upsets their stomach. Try to eat a small bit of fruit or bland toast each day, then slowly increase your intake as your system grows accustomed to it. It is possible that you have simply been choosing the wrong morning food for your sensitive stomach. You may also want to pack yourself a small breakfast snack and carry it with you for later in the morning, when your stomach is less sensitive, such as a nutrition bar or a piece of fruit.

What Is a Healthy Breakfast?

In general you want to eat foods of high nutritional value in the morning. Avoid sugary cereals, which have little nutrients. They raise your blood sugar quickly but then drop it way down to a point at which you are feeling hungry again within an hour. Fast food, too, should be avoided, as it is similarly short on nutrients, and generally contains excessive fat. Low-fat, low-sugar, high-fiber foods are the way to go. These foods help

maintain your blood sugar level for hours and start your day with healthy nutrient intake.

Skipping Meals

Food is fuel. You need it for energy. When you don't eat, you lose energy. It's that simple. But today busy people find they do not always have time for meals. Unfortunately, it is almost impossible to get your daily recommended nutrients if you don't eat.

The daily nutrients are vital to the healthy functioning of all parts of your body. And although you may not notice when your body is running well, you certainly will notice when it starts to break down.

Good daily nutrition is the easiest way to achieve health and optimal performance. If you're not an Olympic athlete, you may wonder what optimal performance means for you. Brain function, cognitive reasoning, attentiveness, memory, and moods are all affected by nutrition. And the things you can't see, including a healthy immune system, are directly related to what you eat as well. Your body needs a constant flow of energy to run smoothly, and eating regularly is crucial to that end.

Fitting It In

As with all successful endeavors, planning is the key. If you typically don't have time for lunch, brown bag it and nibble when time allows. Energy bars, fruit, even a simple peanut butter and jelly sandwich provides an adequate supply of nutrients to get you through the afternoon.

When you skip meals, you are more likely to overeat the wrong foods at the next opportunity. Skipping midday meals leads to unhealthy binge eating in the afternoon and at dinner. Skipping dinner often leads to a similar fate late at night, and sleeping on a full stomach has its own negative impacts.

If time is your problem, planning is the key. Make an effort to shop weekly and stock your pantry with ready-to-eat or easy-to-prepare foods,

such as whole-grain cereals and bread products, peanut butter, crackers, cheese, dried fruits, and nuts.

If you enjoy cooking, but are short on time, use your day off to prepare foods ahead of time. Chop herbs, onions, and vegetables and keep them in your freezer. Prepare sauces, and preportion meats. When you do cook, cook extra. Preportion meals and keep them in the freezer. When you're busy, you're more likely to eat if you have something ready to go than if you have to start from scratch.

To maintain a healthy eating schedule, routine is the key. Standardized menus may sound boring, but they make a lot of sense, especially if healthy eating is your goal. Shopping is easier and cheaper, and preparation becomes effortless.

Slowing Down

Overeating makes you overweight, and eating too fast is a big reason people overeat. When you eat, the food travels into your stomach fairly quickly. But it takes a full twenty minutes for your stomach to notice it's full, and to send that signal to your brain. In that time you are still feeling hungry, and the tendency is to overeat.

Eating slower improves your health and happiness in several ways. It makes you less likely to dive in for seconds, and less food in your stomach makes digestion easier. Plus, when you eat slower you can actually taste the food.

If you are prone to speed eating, there are a few tips you can try to slow down.

- Don't skip meals. Skipping meals is a common precursor to eating too fast.
- When you eat, sit at a table with a plate, napkin, and utensils. Don't eat while watching TV, and don't cram food into your mouth over the sink.

- Eat one forkful at a time, and put the fork down until the food is swallowed.
- Take sips of your beverage between each bite, and wipe with a napkin. Not only will you eat slower, but your improved manners will impress your friends and family.
- Make meals, especially dinner, a social event to share. Enjoy a conversation.

Eating is refueling, but it is also an important communal activity. It is especially important to show this aspect of mealtime to children. Teaching them to slow down, use manners, and enjoy the company at the table is an important lesson that will benefit them as they get older.

Controlling Portion Size

Hefty portions are another big contributor to overeating. Nutritional guidelines give you ample information regarding portions, but it can be a little intimidating. Visions of scales and measuring cups scare people away, and they go back to eating as much as they want. Unfortunately, when you combine large portions with speed eating, binging, and poor nutrition overall, the results are devastating.

This is not to suggest that measuring your food is not useful. But controlling your portion size does not need to include lab coats and beakers. A simple frame of reference is all you need. In general, most portions should resemble the palm of your hand. (Just the palm, not the fingers.) This is a good reference because everyone's palm is different, so variations in age and sex are simple to adjust for.

Don't serve food family style. Large dishes of food set on the table encourage overeating. Worse than that, family style can set up competition for the last piece, which results in speed eating (and sibling disputes).

Question

What is family style?

Family-style service refers to large serving dishes set on the tables. Dishes are passed from person to person, each serving him- or herself. It provides the opportunity for second and third helpings, which means overeating. Instead, put the food on the plates in the kitchen, each with the intended portion.

One last trick to eating less is to serve food on smaller plate. Your eyes are definitely part of your eating experience. Seeing a tiny piece of food on a huge plate starts the meal off with disappointment.

Eating When You're Hungry

Physical cravings are a sign that your body needs food. But cravings can occur for other reasons, and it is important to understand the difference.

When your body is hungry, it tells you. Your stomach feels empty because it is. It growls and rumbles to tell you so. If you ignore it, you'll begin to feel lightheaded and tired and experience a loss in concentration or maybe even a headache. These signals are telling you to eat.

The delicious aroma of baking cookies is not a signal that it is time to eat. The beginning of a movie is not a signal that it is time to eat. Traumatic events are not a signal that it is time to eat.

If you are still unsure of the difference between wanting to eat and needing to eat, there are a couple of questions you can ask yourself. Can you wait it out? If you feel like eating but can wait until the next meal, you're not really hungry. If the feeling of hunger gets stronger as you wait, it's physical, not emotional, hunger.

Essential

If you are craving a specific food, it is often a signal that your body is lacking in certain nutrients. You can tell if these are nutritional needs by examining your recent eating and activity pattern. Excessive salt, diminished protein, and extreme exertion can all result in food cravings as your body attempts to compensate.

Snacks

Snacking is not necessarily a bad thing, as long as it is sensible and adds to your daily nutritional goal. In fact, eating a few smaller meals helps digestion and is healthier overall than eating three larger ones.

Aim for a little bit of food every three to four hours. Snacks should be smaller than regular meals, and they should pack a nutritional punch. Make them low in fat and sugar. Plan them ahead of time, like you plan your meals, with nutrition in mind. Pack them to take with you so you are not tempted to hit the drive-through.

Avoid late-night eating. Although it may help you fall asleep initially, sleeping on a full stomach is not necessarily restful. The body doesn't digest well when sleeping, and conditions such as heartburn are more likely to wake you up. If you find that you are commonly awakened by hunger, a small healthy snack an hour before bedtime is a good idea. Unfortunately, most late-night eating is not healthy. It is binge eating of sweets or alcohol-related cravings that do nothing for you nutritionally. Schedules that include late-night work should include regularly scheduled healthy meals, with larger intake earlier in the day.

Caffeine and Alcohol

Except for water, coffee is the world's most consumed beverage. And wine grapes are the world's most abundant crop. But neither of these beverages, though they have significant cultural, social, and historical heritage, have much nutritional value. Caffeine is a stimulant, and alcohol is a depressant. Both of them alter the way your body functions, and both, when taken in excess, are damaging.

Caffeine

Caffeine is a naturally occurring substance found in the coffee bean, cocoa bean, kola nut, and tea leaf. Taken as a mild stimulant, caffeine increases body temperature, heart rate, and blood pressure. It restricts

blood vessels to the brain, which prevents sleep, and causes the release of adrenaline, which makes you alert.

When abused, caffeine causes anxiety, stomach irritation, headaches, and insomnia. What's worse, it is addictive. Those who consume more than 300 milligrams a day will suffer withdrawal symptoms when cut off from their supply. Symptoms include fatigue, depression, irritability, jitters, and headaches as blood vessels in the brain dilate. Additionally, caffeine is a diuretic, flushing your body of fluids. This makes caffeinated beverages a poor choice as fluid replacements.

Fact

In addition to your favorite beverages, caffeine can also be found in some medications. Medicine for migraines often includes caffeine, which makes the drug work quickly. And caffeine is sometimes used to counteract drowsiness caused by certain medications, such as antihistamines.

Caffeine is not stored in the body, so its effects are not permanent. It can be felt ten to fifteen minutes after ingestion, and the effect lasts two to three hours. Tolerance for caffeine varies, but most adults should limit intake to 200–300 milligrams per day. One cup of coffee is about 90 mg, and sodas average around 40 milligrams.

Cutting Back

To cut back on caffeine, it's best to go slowly. Limit your caffeinated soda and tea intake, and switch your coffee to half-caffeinated. Then take heart in knowing that your headaches will disappear in a week or two.

Alcohol

Alcohol was first coveted as a way to purify water. But its virtues were soon eclipsed by its mind-altering effect and addictive properties. Alcohol is not in and of itself nutritious, and though certain forms may

contain healthful properties, they are negligible in comparison to the damage they do.

Regularly consuming more than the recommended two drinks per day maximum (one for women) raises your chance of getting high blood pressure, stroke, and certain cancers, including liver, colon, esophageal, mouth, and breast cancer in women. Alcohol promotes dehydration, and it impairs muscle coordination, reflexes, reaction time, and balance. In addition, heavy consumption commonly results in malnutrition. While it does not contain many nutrients, alcohol does carry about seven calories for every gram. The calories replace those that would otherwise be consumed by nutritious foods, and alcohol inhibits the functions of many nutrients that are consumed.

Like all extras in your diet, alcohol should be used in moderation.

Eating Out

There are more restaurants than ever before. America has a booming food service industry, and food television programming has made people more aware of the culinary arts than ever before. With the variety of cultures that flourish in this country, you have a plethora of dining choices. But good nutrition requires you to examine the way you dine out.

Convenience Versus Social Dining

The next time you find yourself in a restaurant standing at a host's station, ask yourself why you are there. Is it because you are celebrating a special occasion? Are you spending some quality time with loved ones? Or are you simply looking for convenience over nutritional value?

Few restaurants are known for their nutritious meals. Yes, an occasional vegetarian or whole food establishment pops up from time to time, but these places are few and far between. Restaurants generally aim to attract a specific audience. Determining a restaurant's target audience is the first step in figuring out the healthiest places to dine.

Fine dining establishments are marketing toward the special occasion, or well-to-do diner. This is social dining. The experience is meant as a form of entertainment. A dining experience. Longer, more leisurely meals with multiple courses are a showcase for cuisine, and not necessarily meant to be well-rounded nutritious offerings. Prices usually reflect these targets, though quality doesn't necessarily follow. While these restaurants may not have particularly nutritious offerings on the menu, chefs in these establishments are more generally willing to fill special orders regarding less fat and salt. Here, too, you are more likely to find the kitchen using high-quality foods, including fresh, seasonal produce.

Theme restaurants can also be targeting the social diner, but here, the atmosphere is the main focus, not the food. This type of restaurant is less likely to have a healthy focus, and if the theme is geared toward kids, you will likely find even fewer healthy options.

Fast food, whether it be a worldwide chain, or a local taco stand, has only convenience to offer you. These restaurants focus on filling common cravings for fatty, salty, and sweet foods. They are located at convenient spots, including freeway off ramps, major intersections, grocery stores, and school campuses. Their goal is to get you to buy from them rather than cook for yourself, and so far, they have succeeded. People cook less than ever before. In fact, many kids grow up today never learning to cook. This trend is a dangerous one.

If you go to restaurants regularly, consider cutting back. Ideally, restaurants should be reserved for special occasions, but once a week is a good place to start. The health benefits of eating at home are substantial, and you'll save money, too.

Choosing the Right Restaurant

Healthy restaurant choices are not as important as healthy menu choices. Some of the world's healthiest cuisines, from places like the Mediterranean, Middle East, and Asia, also offer unhealthy choices. (Take

the egg roll, for example. Delicious, but deep fried and full of oil.) But there are restaurants in which you are more likely to find healthy offerings. For example, restaurants with vegetarian menus are usually a good bet.

Asian cuisine typically emphasizes grain and vegetables and uses cooking methods that retain more nutrients. Mediterranean and Middle Eastern cuisines use far more grains and legumes and more monounsaturated olive oil. California cuisine is a trend from the 1970s that emphasizes fresh seasonal ingredients in a fusion of Latin American and Asian styles. It has a lot to offer in the way of nutrition, as does the latest trend of raw cuisine, in which food is barely cooked, if at all. But these cuisines can be just as bad as a bacon cheeseburger and fries if you don't choose wisely off the menu.

Healthy Menu Choices

Some restaurants, especially nationwide chains, have now begun to advertise healthful options. Low-sodium, low-fat, low-cholesterol, high-fiber, or "heart-healthy" options are clearly labeled, often with seals of approval from the American Heart Association.

Most places, however, do not have specialized menus, and it is up to you to know what to avoid. Steer clear of anything labeled "jumbo," "extra large," or similar phrases indicating enormous quantity. Chances are the portion is oversized. Don't order anything fried. Look instead for foods that are grilled or broiled. Ask for sauces and dressings on the side, and request that foods be cooked without butter or oil if possible.

Don't be afraid to ask for special orders. Most restaurants are used to it, and many chefs will happily replace your French fries with vegetables, salads, or fruit. Remember, restaurants need your business. They know that if they can please you, you'll likely return.

Home Cooking

There's no place like home — for nutrition, that is. There is nothing better than a home-cooked meal made from fresh ingredients for your family's health happiness. If you already enjoy cooking, a change in ingredients is no big deal. But if you rarely set foot in the kitchen, you might need a little convincing. The following section will help you get started preparing nutritious meals at home for your family.

Benefits of Cooking at Home

Cooking food at home is the single most important thing you can do for your health and the health of your family. When you do the cooking, you have control. You know exactly what everyone is eating. You control the quality and quantity, and you can cook to meet everyone's needs and preferences.

Cooking at home (meaning from scratch using fresh ingredients — not microwaving a frozen dinner) is fresher, which is a great start to more nutrients. You can maximize nutritional value by the cooking methods you use and by picking quality fresh foods without preservatives. You can also be sure of the cleanliness of the facility.

Eating out is fun, but it gets expensive. Home cooking from raw ingredients is not only healthier, it's also much cheaper. And you may find that cooking is just as fun as dining out, as well as rewarding and even therapeutic. No one says you need to make a feast fit for a king. There are simple dishes and simple preparations that are easy and satisfying.

Finally, there is no better way to show you care than to cook a healthy meal for your loved ones. It is a nurturing act that creates an enduring legacy. If you cook for your kids, they are more likely to cook for theirs, and so on. Good nutrition is a fantastic family tradition.

Healthy Cooking Methods

Preparation can dramatically affect the nutrient content of food. Cooking in a healthful way doesn't take much effort, but it does take some attention.

Fact

Sautéing, which comes from the French term meaning "to jump," is a similar technique to stir-frying. Foods are cooked quickly over high heat and kept in constant motion.

Broiling and grilling are known as dry-heat methods. They require no moisture, and little or no oil is necessary. Definitions vary, but grilling generally refers to food placed over a heat source, and broiling places food under a heat source.

The key to the success of dry-heat cooking is high heat. High temperatures seal the outside of the meat and hold in the juices. Lower temperatures allow more of the natural juices to drip out, yielding a drier finished product.

Stir-frying and pan frying require a small amount of oil. When using it for vegetables, the high heat limits the nutrient loss and keeps the colors fresh and bright.

Steaming is a moist-heat method. Food is suspended in a basket or perforated pan over simmering water, and the heat of the steam does the cooking. Unlike boiling, nutrients are not lost in the water. They can, however, dissipate into the air if overcooked.

Essential

Poaching is great for delicate sausages, fish filets, quenelles, and delicate fruits. The liquid used can be flavored with herbs, spices, or aromatic vegetables, but it is meant strictly for cooking, and is not generally consumed.

Food can also be steamed in its own juices by wrapping it in foil or parchment paper and baking it in the oven. This is a particularly great way to maintain moisture and flavor for low-fat meats like chicken and fish.

Roasting is an all-around dry-heat technique that may or may not involve added fat. When used for meat, it is an excellent way to eliminate fat. Suspended on a rack above a roasting pan, the meat juices drip away.

Roasting is a great method for certain vegetables, including potatoes in their jackets, onions and garlic in their skins, and squash and pumpkin still in the rind. These foods essentially steam themselves soft, and their natural sugars concentrate, providing more natural flavor than when they are peeled and boiled.

Poaching is a moist heat method. It is not boiling, but it's close. Water is kept just below the simmer so that the food is not agitated by the motion of a rolling boil. Boiling employs water or other liquid brought to a rolling boil. Food is added and cooked to the desired doneness. Simmering cooks the food under the boil, but still in motion.

Boiling not only increases the temperature of the cooking, but it keeps the food in motion. This is important for foods that tend to stick, like pasta. Because it leaches nutrients into the cooking liquid, it is best reserved for recipes that utilize the cooking liquid, such as soups and stews. Frugal chefs have been known to save cooking liquid for use in subsequent recipes. Stewing is another moist-heat method, and it usually refers to a longer cooking time. It also frequently refers to a liquid that thickens into a sauce as part of the meal.

Essential

Stews are often enriched with fat or starch, and in most cases they include fatty meats. That's because this method works miraculously to soften the connective tissues of tough meats and melt away the fats, turning them into succulent tender delicacies.

Recipe Modification

Once you find the recipes you want to make, it may be necessary to adjust them to meet your current nutritional standards. This is not at all difficult, and it can be quite rewarding.

Altering recipes will rarely reduce the success of a recipe, although in some cases, it may take a few tries to get it where you want it. The best strategy is to change one element at a time, adding and subtracting methods that do and don't work.

Cutting Fat

Cutting fat is an easy alteration to make to any recipe. You can start by examining the raw ingredients.

Switching to leaner meat is easy. The fat content is generally displayed prominently on the packaging. You can switch to leaner beef or opt for chicken, turkey, or fish instead. Many recipes that are written for one type of meat can easily be made with another. Try turkey, salmon, or tuna burgers for a change of pace.

Oil can be used in place of butter in almost every circumstance. Olive oil is the healthiest choice, but the flavor is fairly prominent and not necessarily desirable in all circumstances. When you want a more neutral flavor, try peanut or canola oil instead. Don't even consider margarine. Even those with no trans fat have an elevated melting point, which leaves an unpleasant aftertaste in your mouth. Even with its saturated fat, butter is preferable to margarine. Another way to reduce the amount of fat in a recipe is to use a nonstick pan. Nearly every style of pot or pan ever manufactured comes in a nonstick version. Take care not to use metal utensils or scrubbies, or the nonstick surface will scrape off.

Choose reduced-fat cheeses, skim milk, light sour cream, low-fat cottage cheese, and nonfat yogurt. If cholesterol is an issue for you, replace eggs with egg whites or egg substitutes.

Cutting Sugar and Salt

There are many sugar substitutes available today, and many measure and cook up just like refined sugar. However, few have undergone any long-term study, and some can even produce unpleasant side effects. If avoiding refined sugar is your goal, consider using honey or date sugar.

Sodium is easy to replace with salt substitutes. Eliminating it completely will take some getting used to, but it can be done successfully given time. Avoid adding salt to recipes until they hit the table to reduce the total amount of salt consumed. Reduced sodium products are plentiful, and many of your everyday salty groceries can be replaced by low-sodium counterparts. Check the labels, and compare brands.

Increasing Nutrition

Adding food with high nutritional value is a great way to improve your recipes. Increasing the amount of vegetables also increases the vitamins, minerals, and fiber. Try grating in squash, carrots, cabbage, chopped spinach, and fresh herbs to your next soup, stew, or casserole. Be sure to add these close to the end of the cooking to maximize their vitamin and mineral content.

Add dried fruits, seeds, and nuts to baked goods and grain dishes for added protein, vitamins, minerals, and omega-3 fatty acids. Sesame, flax, and walnuts are particularly healthful. Add legumes and whole grains to casseroles, soups, pasta dishes, and salads for added soluble and insoluble fiber and protein.

Pound for Pound

Certain products can, and should, be switched outright for use on a daily basis. Use whole-wheat flour instead of nutrient-challenged white all-purpose flour. Look for stone-ground organic varieties to maximize the nutritional value. You will find that your baked goods taste and look different, but take heart. You and your family will grow accustomed to it in short order. You may actually come to prefer it.

Shopping Strategies

Believe it or not, grocery shopping can be fun — if you are prepared and allot enough time for it, that is. It can also be a successful way to bring the entire family on board the healthy food express. Make them a part of the process and they are more likely to enjoy the changes.

Menu Planning

It may sound like a lot of work, and a little hyper-organized, but by planning out a week's worth of meals you will actually save time and money and eliminate a good deal of stress.

The first step is to brainstorm with your family for meal ideas. Remember that if they don't like it, they probably won't eat it. This is most important when it comes to snacking. If everything in the kitchen looks unappetizing, your family will find their snacks somewhere else.

After you have found recipes you like, make a list of all the week's meals, including breakfast, lunch, dinner, snacks, and dessert. Use it to make your list of ingredients. Whittle that list into the things you actually need to buy, then you're off to the races. (If you're a coupon clipper, don't forget them!)

Bring at least one helper to the market if you can. Kids will need lessons in label reading and price comparison. It may take a few trips until it sinks in, but persevere. Your goal is to teach them how to recognize the good from the bad. Be patient, and know that you are giving them valuable life skills.

A Healthy Pantry

Stocking your cupboards with food is not hard. Stocking with healthy food is a bit more challenging, but you need to be sure you have the right stuff on hand so that cooking healthfully is not a chore.

Have plenty of staple ingredients in the house. This includes whole-wheat flours, natural sweeteners, low-sodium broths, whole-wheat pasta,

and plenty of fresh and frozen vegetables. Keep nuts and dried fruits on hand for snacking as well as recipes. Keep lots of seasonal fresh fruits and vegetables in the fridge, and if you have a farmers market, try to shop there from time to time for the really fresh, and often unusual, stuff.

Spices and Herbs

Keep plenty of flavorings around to add interest to your meals. Spices and herbs are a great way to do this. Spices are the bark, seed, resin, root, stem, fruit, or bud of a plant, tree, or shrub. They count among their rank the familiar, such as cinnamon, mustard, ginger, licorice, juniper, and cloves. Most are available whole and ground. They begin to lose their flavor and aroma as soon as they are ground, and the longer they sit on the shelf, the weaker they get. The most economical and flavorful way to purchase spices is in whole form. Spices kept whole will last for years with little loss of flavor and can be ground as needed. A mortar and pestle is the classic way to grind whole spices. There are also special spice graters and grinders at every gourmet gadget shop. But perhaps the easiest way to grind spices today is with a coffee grinder. Keep a separate grinder for your spices.

Some spices, especially seeds, benefit from light toasting prior to grinding to help release their aromatic oils. You can do this in a dry sauté pan on top of the stove. Keep the spices moving as they heat up, and remove them from the heat, and the hot pan, as soon as you smell the spice. Let the toasted spices cool down for a few minutes before you grind them. Larger spices, like nutmeg and cinnamon, can be broken into smaller pieces before being ground. A meat mallet is a perfect tool for this. If you're into gadgets, you can buy special graters designed especially for large spices.

Alert

To get their maximum effect in your recipes, add spices early in the cooking process. Because fat is a natural flavor carrier, adding your spices to oil brings out the flavors and permeates a recipe.

Herbs

Herbs are green, leafy plants. With a few exceptions they have delicate, nonwoody stems. If allowed to grow to maturity, herbs develop into flowers and seeds. Many of these seeds are then reclassified as spices when dried.

You can use herbs in fresh or dried forms. They are usually interchangeable, but they each have different characteristics.

Dried herbs tend to have stronger flavor than their fresh counterparts, but they lose their flavor very quickly. Ground and powdered herbs have an increased surface area that allows the flavorful oils to dissipate faster. Buy them in small quantities and store them in a cool, dry, dark space to maximize their lifespan. When you're ready to use them, rub them in your hands to release more oils. Be sure to add dried herbs in the last thirty minutes of a recipe for maximum effect. In cold recipes, like salads and marinades, the longer the herb is in contact with the food, the more intense the flavor will be.

When choosing fresh herbs, look for bright green leaves that stay on the stem. You shouldn't see any bruised or dried leaves, and the stems should be straight. When you get them home, wash them right away, then drain them in a colander for a few minutes before refrigerating. Wrap them loosely in paper towels and store them in the produce drawer.

When adding fresh herbs to recipes, remember that you need more fresh herbs than dried. A general conversion rule is three parts fresh herb to one part dry. Chopping them very fine releases as much flavor as possible. Like any green vegetable, herbs discolor and lose nutrients when overcooked. Add them into recipes at the very end of cooking to maximize flavor and nutrients.

Cooking with the Kids

Cooking at home is the very best way to stay healthy, and to bring your family together. As soon as your kids can walk, it's time to get them involved. Toddlers can be a part of the action by coloring placemats or name cards and helping someone older set the table. But once they reach elementary school, it's time to get them cooking.

Beyond Pizza and Cookies

Kids should be familiar with all parts of the kitchen, and be able to feed themselves without fear of burning the house down. It's also important to show them that there is more to mealtime than setting, clearing, and washing the dishes. The best way to make that happen is to start them early.

Most cooking courses for kids teach "kid food," like pizza and cookies. It's fun for them, but it does not teach them how to really cook for themselves. These courses concentrate on recipes, and ignore personal taste. When a parent does the teaching, the lessons are tailored to the student, and the mini chef will be better able to explore his own creativity in the kitchen, which is where all the fun is.

An easy place to start your cooking lessons is at breakfast. Breakfast meals are usually fairly simple to prepare, they have few ingredients, and they can be enjoyed right away. Cereal is a no-brainer, but there are still things to learn, such as serving the correct portion, pouring milk without spilling, and the proper way to clean up spilt milk. Don't forget to show the proper way to store food to keep it fresh.

Essential

For more complex lessons, like toast, eggs, or oatmeal, be sure to allot enough time in the morning to assist. The first few lessons might be best

learned on a weekend, when stress to get out the door doesn't overshadow the joy of cooking. Then, after a few Saturdays, try it on a school day.

Lunch, too, is another good starting point. Sandwiches are simple, but cutting up fruit and vegetables may take some training, not to mention packing things properly to keep them fresh and spill-proof. In the winter months, a batch of homemade soup in a thermos will be the envy of the playground. Kids are much more likely to eat a lunch they pack themselves.

Dinnertime is family time, and it is a great time to get everyone together. Basic helping skills will grow into preparation of a course, and eventually an entire meal. While holidays and special events often see families cooking together, making it an everyday event prolongs the daily together time and provides an opportunity not just for culinary training, but also for broader "quality-time" discussions.

Techniques to Emphasize

When teaching cooking to kids or adults, there are basic skills that must be addressed. First and foremost is safety and sanitation.

Safety First

Children should be able to navigate the kitchen safely. Show them everything that gets hot, including the hot tap of the sink. Describe how the stove works, and teach them to turn it on and off. If you have a gas range, point out the pilot light and explain the mechanism. If yours is electric, spend time watching the coils heat and turn red. Do the same with the oven, toaster, and any other countertop appliance that little fingers can get stuck in. If they learn what the appliances are for, and how to operate them, they are less likely to experiment with them on the sly. Don't forget to give rules for the microwave, including no metal or tin foil.

Alert

Knives in the sink water can get hidden under the soapy bubbles. Blindly reaching in to do the dishes can result in a nasty cut. Leave them on the edge of the sink.

Reveal where the sharp knives are kept, and demonstrate how to use them properly. Show the wrong way, too. Cut something, and explain that the blade cuts everything that way, even fingers. Explain knife safety rules, such as no walking or running around with a knife. Put it down on the counter, don't drop it into the sink water, don't point it at anyone, and never, ever play with it.

Keep It Clean

Keep hair tied back, wear short sleeves, and give everyone an apron. Discuss sanitation and germs. Talk about food on clothing and how it can spread germs to other places and people in the house. Show the proper way to wash hands before handling food and explain when hands need to be rewashed.

Talk about cross-contamination and how one should always use a separate cutting board for meat. Show how to clean as you cook, keeping work areas tidy and keeping up with dirty dishes. Explain that the floor is not a garbage can, and that someone (usually the messiest one) needs to sweep it after the cooking is complete.

Teacher Training

There is no curriculum to follow when teaching your kids to cook. There is only opportunity and encouragement. Try to be patient, and let them make messes and mistakes. Many of the best lessons are learned from mistakes. If you constantly finish things for them, they will not learn, and the experience will be less interesting for them.

Not all kids show an interest in cooking, which is fine. Not everyone has to love it. Everyone does need to learn basic skills to feed themselves,

and to pull their weight with the family chores. For these kids, keep the lessons as short and as delicious as you can.

Teaching the Food Label

When teaching kids to cook, it is especially important to show them healthy ingredients. At the market, point out the different choices, and discuss which option would be the healthiest. The food label is on practically everything, so there is ample opportunity to compare. In your kitchen, show them where to find the label and discuss its different components. Specifically show them the sugar, fiber, protein, and fat listings. Even younger kids should be able to look at the label and find these basic nutrients.

You can really empower older kids by diving a little deeper into the contents of their food.

Pick a food you know to be high in fat and show its food label. Discuss fat, our need for it, and our overuse of it. Do the same with fiber, sugar, protein, and sodium. Then, take them to the market and let them pick the best products for you.

Supermarket Scavenger Hunt

The following activity is designed to get your kids reading labels and make them aware of what is in the foods they eat. Give them these questions, a clipboard, a pencil, and let them loose in the supermarket. (It's best to do this during a slow shopping time.) It will take about an hour to complete, so you may want to divide it up into a few smaller trips. When they have completed the hunt, discuss their findings. It will be an eye-opening experience for them.

1. Find a low-fat or low-calorie ice cream.

- Name of product:
- Serving size:
- Calories per serving:

- Percent of fat per serving:
- Does it contain hydrogenated fat?

2. Find the fat percentage in a single serving of the following items:

- Hot dog
- Veggie dog
- Plain yogurt
- Low-fat plain yogurt
- Italian salad dressing
- Ranch salad dressing
- Cheddar cheese
- Low-fat Cheddar cheese
- Which product had the most fat? Which had the least?

3. Find the calories per serving of the following items:

- Strawberry jam
- Sugar-free strawberry jam
- Whole milk
- Fat-free milk
- Sour cream
- Low-fat sour cream
- Which products have the most calories? Which have the least?

4. Pick your favorite cookie and find out:

- Name of product:
- Serving size:
- Calories per serving:
- Percent of sugar per serving:
- Does it contain hydrogenated fat?
- How many different types of sugar can you find in the ingredients?
(Hint: their names end in “ose”)

5. Find a cookie with the least amount of calories.

- Name of product:
- Serving size:
- Calories per serving:
- Percent of sugar per serving:
- Does it contain hydrogenated fat?

6. Find the sodium per serving of the following products:

- Ketchup
- Mustard
- Chicken noodle soup
- Ramen
- Potato chips
- Pretzels
- Are there low-sodium versions of the same products?

7. Find four cereals with at least four grams of fiber per serving.

- Name of product:
- Serving size:
- Grams of fiber per serving:
- Name of product:
- Serving size:
- Grams of fiber per serving:
- Name of product:
- Serving size:
- Grams of fiber per serving:
- Name of product:
- Serving size:
- Grams of fiber per serving:

8. Find a loaf of white bread and find out:

- Name of product:

- Calories per slice:
- Grams of fiber per slice:
- First ingredient listed:

9. Find a loaf of multigrain bread (seven-grain, twelve-grain, etc.) and find out:

- Name of product:
- Calories per slice:
- Grams of fiber per slice:
- First ingredient listed:

10. Find the percentage of sugar per serving in the following products:

- Cola
- Ketchup
- Fat-free ranch dressing
- Ice cream sandwiches
- Jell-O
- Which product had the most sugar? Which had the least?

You can extend the scavenger hunt idea into many different arenas. Try a hunt for fruits and vegetables. A simple list will get them reading signs and identifying produce.

Family Menu Planning

Showing kids how to plan a menu is great experience and an important skill to learn. The ability to organize and plan can be applied to all aspects of their lives, from cleaning their rooms and doing homework to college and their own household management.

The first step in menu planning is to make a list. List the meals and snacks for an entire week. Be sure to give the kids a say in the food they make and eat. (Of course, parents have veto power.) A useful strategy includes giving every family member a day of the week to have their favorite meal.

Organize the meals and snacks in a calendar form, then take a good look at it. How does the week's menu compare to dietary guidelines? It may take a bit of adjusting before it meets them. Remember to serve a majority of whole-grain foods at every meal, lots of vegetables, and about two servings of protein a day. Limit fat and sugar, and opt for fruit as a sweet treat, rather than cookies or ice cream, at least on a daily basis.

Print the menu out and post it on the fridge. Let the kids decorate it for the season. Use the menu to create your shopping list. By repeating the menu for several weeks you can save money buying products in larger quantities. At the market, you can divide up the list and send the kids off in a hunt for the things you need. Change the menu once in a while, to keep everyone from getting bored.

Essential

Shopping provides an opportunity to teach kids about price and value. Show them the different brands and compare prices. Is there something on sale? Do you have coupons? Is the quantity in each brand the same? How is it packaged? All these elements play a role in determining the best value.

Now everyone has proudly participated in meal preparation. As they grow older, having taken part in this process will make them better able to handle it on their own.

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