

Basics of Nutrition:

How To Find/Choose Healthy Foods In A Fast Paced World

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Finding time to make a healthy meal in our modern lifestyle can many times be a challenge. We are overbooked, “understaffed” and on an ever-tighter budget. Families increasingly depend on eating out and short-cuts in the kitchen. The impact of making unhealthy choices is profound and our population continues to suffer as a consequence.¹ The long term effects of unhealthy choices in both adults and children are diabetes, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, stroke, dehydration, elevated stress, insomnia and more. When it comes to either taking care of ourselves or our family, how do we make healthy choices when an “organic home-cooked balanced meal” seems completely unobtainable? Well, there is hope and it’s just a matter of being well informed and prepared.

Most of the following tips come from my own experience as a single mother. Previous to my son’s birth I spent hours in the kitchen creating gourmet meals based on carefully selected recipes which focused on taste, presentation and a balanced nutritional component often translating into “make everything by hand”. Today, I really understand what it means to have limited resources in time and money. To ensure we are eating right, I’ve had to go “back to the basics” to find quick and healthy ways to prepare meals. The good news is that it’s easier that it seems. Here’s how it works.

Any food that I consume must answer to the following questions.

1. **Is it natural?** In other words, did mother nature intend for me to be eating this product? Is it a GMO (genetically modified) food?
2. **What are the ingredients? “READ THE LABEL”** Steer far away from artificial anything including sweeteners, anything you can’t pronounce, and excessive amounts of sugar, fats and fillers.
3. **Is it practical for me to purchase this product?** In other words, will it really be eaten? is the price reasonable? and what is its nutritional component?

¹ The global epidemic of overweight and obesity - "globesity" - is rapidly becoming a major public health problem in many parts of the world. Paradoxically coexisting with undernutrition in developing countries, the increasing prevalence of overweight and obesity is associated with many diet-related chronic diseases including diabetes mellitus, cardiovascular disease, stroke, hypertension and certain cancers. World Health Organization, <http://www.who.int/bmi/index.jsp>

In 2005–2006, more than 34% of adults aged 20 years or older were obese. The prevalence of overweight among children aged 2–5 years increased from 5.0% during 1976–1980 to 13.9% during 2003–2004. During the same period, the prevalence increased from 6.5% to 18.8% among young people aged 6–11 years, and 5.0% to 17.4% among those aged 12–19 years. Center for Disease Control and Prevention; <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/publications/aag/dnps.htm>

4. **How was this product prepared?** Keep in mind food processing, breading, glazing, heating, drying, freezing, frying, baking, vacuum packs, etc.
5. **What are the side-effects of this product?** This might sound like a silly question but consider items such as coffee, triple chocolate mousse, heavy cream, cotton candy, pork rind, gummy bears, and sodas, and fast-food items like chicken nuggets, French fries, and burgers.

Home Meals: Short Cuts in the Kitchen

Step 1: Consult the Cookbook - start with finding easier foods to prepare which don't require excessive starches, carbohydrates or fats. Look for vegetables, fruits and meat based dishes instead of rice and pasta. Then, search out recipes that require little time for preparation or that can be prepared in advance. Finally, look for recipes that don't require purchasing exotic ingredients or too many different ingredients. These recipes are easier to remember and you're more likely to repeat them in the future. *My favorites are soups and fruit salads.*

Step 2: Plan ahead – find ways to incorporate new recipes into your current eating habits so that switching will feel natural. Small changes are easier to sustain long-term than big shifts. Also, planning around time commitments can take away the feeling of “creating under pressure” and of being overwhelmed. Ideally, create multiple meals at once when there is time and either freeze or refrigerate the extra. *I often cook enough for two meals at once and then refrigerate the leftovers for the next day.*

Step 2: Make a list – Before you go to the store do the essential task of making a list. This keeps you focused on what is really needed while the kids are trying to convince you to buy them a new toy or candy. In addition, when you get into the habit of making a list and sticking with it, it will save you money as it curbs those last-minute impulse buys. *At home we follow the rule of going to the store a maximum of 2 times per week, whatever runs out in between, we go without.*

Step 3: Supermarket Selections: Judging from the size of the grocery stores these days you would think that we have an abundance of healthy choices. The reality is that there are rows of products that offer little or no nutritional value mostly due to excessive fats, sugar and artificial ingredients. *When I go shopping I see two sections in the store, what I eat (Produce and Fruit section) and what I need to support the cooking process (the canned, bottled goods in the aisles like olive oil, rice and spices).*

Ask yourself the following questions when selecting foods:

Preparing the Meal

My all time favorite simple solution is **soup**. All broth-based soups & stews are great options, they can be prepared in advance, reheated and can hold as many ingredients as you choose to put in. Soups also have the benefit of packing in many different kinds of nutrients in a small serving. Just be cautious of adding fats or too many potatoes. Soups and stews can be vegetarian or with meat or fish. Start with a sautéed onion on canola oil (not olive oil) and just start adding ingredients.

Vegetables: eat more vegetables! Find dishes like Ratatouille, vegetarian couscous, roasted vegetable stir-fries. Get used to eating steamed veggies without butter or cheese. Discover their natural flavor.

Salads: fruit salads and veggie salads are also a great way to ensure we get great nutrition without too much fuss. The key to keeping the salads healthy is not adding sugar to the fruit salad nor heavy dressing to the green salad. Keep your fruit salad tasty by pouring fresh orange juice over it. For the green salad just use oil & vinegar or a vinaigrette dressing. Bean salads are also a great way to pack in the nutrients in a small serving.

Snacks: Consider having fresh fruit, graham crackers, nuts, cheese toast, corn tortillas with chicken. Look for brands like Kashi and TLC for organic all-natural options to popular children's snacks like fruit roll-ups, gummy bears, cheese crackers, trail mix and cereal. Make sure your kids are eating as close to natural as possible.

Fast Food: If time is of essence and eating out is necessary, then think about getting something that resembles a home cooked meal. Good choices are places that serve fresh grilled chicken with rice and beans or steamed vegetables. Or even fresh made soups. I often look for smaller family owned restaurants than the large chains, small shops tend to buy smaller quantities from local businesses instead of bringing in pre-cooked or packaged meals from national food purveyors. In addition, I often choose world-culture restaurants (Mexican, Korean, Japanese, Thai and good quality Chinese) over the large American chains. This offers fresh food often prepared in small batches and a better balance between nutrients vs. fillers. Another advantage is that their prices are often quite reasonable. If you do have to use the drive-through, choose the salads, grilled burgers, or wraps instead of the fried foods. Drink water or iced tea instead of soda. And absolutely skip the dessert.