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**March is National Nutrition Month**

*Information from the American Heart Association:*

**What is a healthy diet?**

A healthy diet and lifestyle are your best weapons to fight cardiovascular disease. It’s not as hard as you may think! Re-member, it's the overall pattern of your choices that counts.

You may be eating plenty of food, but your body may not be getting the nutrients it needs to be healthy. Nutrient-rich foods have minerals, protein, whole grains and other nutrients but are lower in calories. They may help you control your weight, cholesterol and blood pressure.

The right number of calories to eat each day is based on your age and physical activity level and whether you're trying to gain, lose or maintain your weight.

You could use your daily allotment of calories on a few high-calorie foods and beverages, but you probably wouldn’t get the nutrients your body needs to be healthy. Limit foods and beverages high in calories but low in nutrients. Also limit the amount of saturated fat, Trans fat and sodium you eat. Read Nutrition Facts labels carefully — the Nutrition Facts panel tells you the amount of healthy and unhealthy nutrients in a food or beverage.

**Healthy Eating Tips to try this month:**

* **Slow down on the sodium**: Americans eat more than double the daily amount of sodium recommended by the American Heart Association. Too much sodium increases the risk of heart disease, stroke and other health problems, but this excess isn’t just from salting at the table. Americans get most of their sodium — 77 percent — from processed foods. If you choose these foods, compare the labels and look for lower-sodium versions.
* **Pile on the fruits and vegetables**: Choose all kinds of fruits and vegetables — fresh, frozen, canned, juiced and dried. Fruits and vegetables contain vitamins, minerals and other nutrients. Look for fruits and vegetables of many different colors. Then try a “healthy sauté” using a small amount of liquid to cook vegetables. Need a quick, healthy weeknight dinner? Try a salad. The American Heart Association has tasty recipes packed with such items as tofu, broccoli, mushrooms and much more.
* **Get the skinny on fats**: Learn how to substitute good fats (mono and pol-unsaturated fats) for bad fats (saturated and trans fats). For example, try canola oil or olive oil instead of butter. Choose lean meats, poultry without skin and fish instead of fattier cuts of meats. Enjoy heart-healthy fats in moderation and remember this tip: 1 teaspoon equals 1 serving.
* **Cook at home.** Cooking at home is not only a great way to make sure the ingredients are healthy, but portions are correct. Try using a smaller salad-size plate instead of a big dinner plate, as well.

**Limiting Saturated and Trans Fats for your Heart:**

* Select lean cuts of beef and pork, especially cuts with "loin" or "round" in their name.
* Cut back on processed meats high in saturated fat, such as hot dogs, salami and bacon.
* Bake, broil, roast, stew or stir-fry lean meats, fish or poultry.
* Drain the fat off of cooked, ground meat.
* When you make a stew or soup, refrigerate leftovers and skim off the fat with a spoon before reheating and serving.
* Eat fish regularly. Try different ways of cooking such as baking, broiling, grilling and poaching to add variety.
* Include plant foods as sources of protein, including soybeans, pinto beans, lentils and nuts.
* Replace higher-fat cheeses with lower-fat options such as reduced-fat feta and part-skim mozzarella.
* Thicken sauces with evaporated fat-free milk instead of whole milk.
* Move toward using lower-fat milk and yogurt. Start with 2-percent products, then move to 1-percent and finally to fat-free to adjust to the new taste.
* Use liquid vegetable oils and soft margarine instead of stick margarine or shortening.
* Limit Trans fats often found in foods such as cakes, cookies, crackers, pastries, pies, muffins, doughnuts and French fries. Many food manufacturers have removed trans fats from their foods. Check the Nutrition Facts panel on food labels to see if trans fats are listed.
* Use a small amount of oils such as canola, olive and soybean in recipes and for sautéing.
* Make salad dressings with olive, walnut or pecan oil.

**FAMILY DINNERS FOR WEEK-NIGHTS**

Life can be tough on family dinnertime. With all the rushing around, it's easy to slip into the fast-food lane or microwave habit with everyone eating at different times and places.

Bringing balance into busy evenings is well worth the effort. Your whole family will feel better when they are eating nutritious meals together. Fortunately, there are simple steps that can help families get a tasty dinner on the table easily and quickly. It starts with planning and meal time organization. Then, get everyone involved in preparing and serving the meal. When everybody pitches in, no one feels overwhelmed. Here are a few approaches to the dinnertime dilemma.

**Have a Week's Worth of Menus in Mind**

Whether you write them down or keep them in your head, you need five to seven kid-tested, parent-approved main dishes. Pick options that are easy and popular with everyone. Once you have an entrée, such as tacos, spaghetti, oven-baked chicken or slow-cooker stew, all you have to add is a vegetable and/or fruit and perhaps a whole-grain roll to complete the meal.

**Keep Your Kitchen Stocked with Quick-to-Fix Foods**

Whenever you shop, look for specials on staples (rice, pasta, beans, etc.) as well as frozen and canned fruits and vegetables with little or no added salt or sugars. With a wide variety of tasty choices on hand, you'll only have to worry about the main dish when it's time to make dinner. Add fresh produce items when in season.

**Prepare Multiple Batches of Main Ingredients**

If you're cooking ground beef, it's just as easy to cook a double or triple batch. Freeze extra servings to reheat for tacos or casseroles. Try slicing, marinating and freezing extra beef, pork, chicken or fish for stir-fry dishes. Drop any one of these protein options into a wok or skillet for quick cooking on a busy night.

**Get the Whole Family Involved from Start to Finish**

The evening meal doesn't have to be one person's responsibility. Even very young children enjoy being involved in planning and preparing healthful meals. Assign age-appropriate jobs, such as choosing the fruit for dessert, mixing pre-cut vegetables into a salad, setting the table with unbreakable dishes or clearing the dishes afterwards.

**Want a great recipe to help your kids learn measuring skills while they have fun in the kitchen?** Try this smoothie, loaded with nutrition powerhouses such as milk, bananas, blueberries, kiwi and yes, spinach!

**Ingredients**

2 cups frozen unsweetened strawberries ½ cup blueberries 1 banana cut in chunks ½ kiwi, sliced 2 cups fresh spinach ½ cup ice cubes 1 cup fat-free milk ½ cup 100-percent apple juice.

**Directions**

1. Combine strawberries, blueberries, banana, kiwi, spinach, ice cubes, fat-free milk and apple juice in blender.

2. Blend until smooth.

3. Serve in a cup with low-fat or fat-free string cheese for a tasty treat.