

October 25, 2007

## Consider offering trick-or-treaters something a little healthier



Americans celebrate Halloween in a big way. “We spend more money on Halloween candy, second only to Christmas in total sales” (Peter Smith in “By the Numbers”, The Toronto Star, Oct 27, 2002.) In addition to the excess consumption of candy treats, there are fears about food safety and whether foreign objects are present. Added to these concerns, are those raised by parents, police, politicians, educators,

and health professionals, who fear that the focus on candy as the primary Halloween treat, poses a serious threat to the growing number of children and adults who are already too fat and many who have diabetes. Another frightening thought is what all of this candy is doing to our teeth.

While it is true that we should be able to enjoy an occasional high fat, high sugar, low nutrient item and fit this into an overall healthy eating plan without feeling guilty, too many of us have been unable to think in moderation. “Obesity rates in children have doubled since 1980 and two out of every three Americans are overweight with a growing number becoming obese. Most of us are eating too much and moving too little”. (Nutrition Action Newsletter, March 2004). Should we ignore these trends or try to do something positive to change them. While you may argue that there are many other reasons for caloric excess, most would agree that giving children alternatives is a good place to start.

Remember that what most of us enjoy and appreciate is our freedom of choice and having input into decisions that affect our health and safety. Involve your children and grandchildren and make holidays a learning experience. Take a trip to shop for treats at an inexpensive store or one that purchases in bulk and then sells cheaper to you. Establish a cost per item limit and kids will have fun doing the math and finding a bargain that they will enjoy. Encourage creativity and strengthen a child's individuality by helping them to select items that are less conventional. Donate extra treats to your local food bank or to meals on wheels locations. These food donations should be distributed to individuals in small quantities over an extended period of time.

Better yet, rather than sending your little ghost or goblin out, throw a party where you can control what and how much children will eat. Deck your halls



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with spider webs and skeletons and carve a pumpkin into a spooky Jack O Lantern. Focus less on the food, and more on activities that engage children.

Help children to think about what and how much they eat and when they will exercise. Remember that adults can become important role models for behaviors that we want children to develop. Eat what you want children to eat and encourage them to be physically active. Why not make this Halloween a healthy, happy and safe one for you and your family.

Check out the treat listings below that children will enjoy and that you, too, will feel good about as well. Remember that you are vital to helping future generations to live a long and healthy life. Many of the keys to healthy aging can begin in childhood. Do you want to be remembered by the size of the candy bar that you gave as a treat, or by the special, one of a kind item that was enjoyed? The legacy you leave behind is in your hands.

Healthy Halloween handouts: Use your imagination!

- Try these no eat treats — Stickers, your children's used book, tattoo transfers, balloons (not good for young kids), sugar free gum, fast food coupons, tiny note pads, pencils, funny erasers, little soaps, toothbrushes, coins, coloring books, pony tail holders, wax lips, floss, play jewelry, book marks.
- Edible treats that are individually wrapped and that you can parcel out over time — Packaged peanut butter or cheese crackers, little bags of cheese fish crackers, cereal mixes, trail mix, or pretzels, no nuts please due to serious food allergies, boxes of raisins, cereal bars, individual bags of hot cocoa mix, pumpkin seeds, individually wrapped cheese sticks, fruit or pudding cups, juice boxes.

*This column was written by Carole Milas, MS, RD, LDN, co-program director of the Center for Healthy Aging. For more information on this article, please call 412-624-3190.*

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