



## National nutrition month

### March a good month to start healthy eating habits



Eat smart!

March is national nutrition month, a month dedicated to encouraging Americans to pay more attention to what they eat. For me as a nutritionist, it's automatic. I think about food with great delight and passion. I think about the color combination of the foods on my plate, whether I ate a ½ or a ¼ cup of a certain food, did I have sufficient fiber or drink enough milk to get my body's requirement of calcium and

vitamin D?

When I prepare foods, I consider what I can add to the recipe to increase its nutritional value, or which ingredient can I substitute for another to make it either lower in calories or fat. This interest in foods extends to conversations I have with family members, when I talk to them about what they ate for lunch or dinner. Food is my life, a central part of who I am.

You, on the other hand, may think of other aspects of food: the flavor, smell, or possibly the conversation or socialization that often accompanies a good meal. This is all good.

Common themes are that food should be fun; eating should be enjoyable; and the entire dining experience should evoke feelings of family, health, tradition, gratitude, celebration, culture, to name just a few. Is it possible that you can think more like a nutrition professional to consider your food choices more seriously? Let me remind you of the saying, "We are what we eat." Could this be the month when you decide to make what you eat a health priority?

People spend too much time discussing the health consequences of eating too much and exercising too little.

Unfortunately, however, this concern has not resulted in improved food selection. We get bogged down with the serious fact that four of the leading causes of death in the U.S. – cardiovascular disease, stroke, some forms of cancer and type II diabetes – are associated with unhealthy eating patterns, a viewpoint shared by medical experts. Is it possible to take the positive (the joys) and the negative (disease outcomes) to establish an acceptable common ground to help the growing number of Americans eat better without the need to "diet". We all know that diets don't work and that what we need is a healthier lifestyle, a way of living.

I am proud to be a registered dietitian, a member of a group of nutrition professional's dedicated to providing the public and the media with valuable science and nutrition information. The slogan for this month is "Nutrition: It's a matter of fact." Below I have summarized a few simple "facts" that will help you to eat better.

- Focus on moderation. Consider this quote from Ben Franklin "to lengthen thy life, lesson thy meals". What a timely piece of wisdom. Consider preplanning. This important skill is one of determining what and how much you will eat before you eat. Preferably, write down your plan for each meal and try to follow it. Include more fruits, vegetable, and fiber. Meal plans can be used to generate a grocery list. Combine multiple meal plans from the week. Who needs a standardized plan copied from last month's magazine when you can have a personalized one.
- Think color. Isn't it amazing that nature thought to identify nutrients in food color codes. Include more fruits and vegetables.
- Add variety. Choose different foods with various textures, shapes, and smells that offer important nutrients that you may be lacking and variety to prevent boredom. Remember that as people age, their need for high quality protein actually increases. Include more fish, lean meat and add dried peas and beans to soups and salads. A piece of meat or fish the size of a deck of cards is a serving.
- Be selective. Your body is your castle and it relies on you to choose wisely. Limit your intake of foods that are high in calories, but offer few nutrients. Nutritionists call this eating smart.
- Move more. Choose activities that are fun and safe that you will enjoy often.

Nutrition is the foundation for life. Making improvements in the food that you eat and in being more physically active are things that only you can do. Don't wait until a serious medical condition forces you to change your diet and activity pattern. The choice is yours and the time is now.

"You have the power, the right, and the freedom," quotes Alexandra Stoddard in her book, "You Are Your Choices: 50 Ways to Live the Good Life." The choice is yours and the time is now.

*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.*

*CHA is a part of the Department of Epidemiology in the Graduate School of Public Health at the University of Pittsburgh. It is one of 33 Prevention Research Centers in the United States funded by the Centers for Disease Control. For questions or more information contact David J. Fetterman, Community Outreach Coordinator & Director of Education at the Center for Healthy Aging at 412-383-3121 or visit [www.healthyaging.pitt.edu](http://www.healthyaging.pitt.edu)*