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Can Low-Income Families Afford Healthful Diets?

Few Americans successfully follow the federal dietary guidelines.

Eating a healthful diet is important to prevent risk of cardiovascular diseases, obesity, and to improve overall health status. Economically disadvantaged families are most vulnerable for poor health outcomes, partly because they can not afford to eat healthfully. These families often are unable to include whole grains, fruits, vegetables, low-fat dairy products, and lean meats in their diets. In today's economy, food budgets have shrunk to offset the cost of housing, gas, medical care, and utilities.

Adding to the struggle is this region's high cost of living. Oakland ranks ninth on the list of most expensive urban areas, with a cost of living index of 147.9, meaning you would spend \$147.90 here for every \$100.00 spent

in the average U.S. community. These high living costs force families in this area to make difficult decisions to try to make ends meet. To stretch their food budgets, many select lower-cost foods, such as refined grains and starches, high-fat foods, and sweets, instead of more healthful foods.

The 2008 national average cost of including the recommended daily quantities of fruits (2 cups) and vegetables (2½ cups) in a 2000 calorie diet would amount to \$2.50 per day. Most families in low-income neighborhoods lack access to healthful foods and end up paying more for them, when available. What fruits and vegetables are available are often of lower quality.

Temporary safety net programs like the USDA's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Women, Infants and Children (WIC), School Meals, and Emergency Food Services are available for families of lower income. In Alameda County, over half of the families eligible for SNAP are not participating; more than a third of the children eligible for the School Lunch Program are not enrolled. Schools can help spread the word and help give low-income families the purchasing power necessary to afford healthful diets.



Photo: Network for a Healthy California

Inside this Issue

Can Low-Income Families Afford Healthful Diets?	1
Why the Fuss about Omega Fatty Acids?	2
Herbs & Spices	2-3
Family Approach to Keeping Active and Healthy	4

References:

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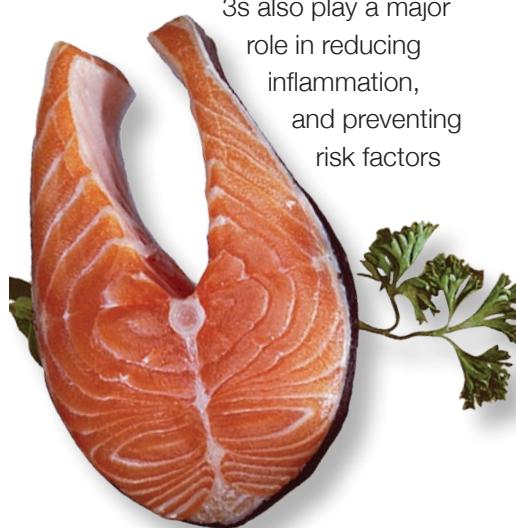
Why the Fuss about Omega Fatty Acids?

They are important to your health. Omega-3 and omega-6 are essential fatty acids – the body requires but cannot produce them; they must be obtained through the diet. The most recent government dietary recommendations give preferences to polyunsaturated fats. Polyunsaturated fats occur naturally in many foods. Omega fatty acids (omega-3 and omega-6) are types of polyunsaturated fats. Scientists are still discovering many things about these two omega fatty acids, but there is enough evidence to suggest that diets high in omega-3 are very beneficial.

Corn, sunflower, and safflower oils are high in polyunsaturated fats; canola and olive oils are high in monounsaturated fats. These fats are healthier to use than saturated (butter, lard, coconut, and palm oils) and trans (used in many processed foods) fats.

For children, omega-3 fatty acids are important for brain development and function. During pregnancy, infants not receiving enough omega-3s from their mothers are at risk of developing vision and nerve problems. Omega-

3s also play a major role in reducing inflammation, and preventing risk factors



Photos: National Cancer Institute (salmon) and Network for a Healthy California (walnut)



linked to chronic diseases such as heart disease, cancer, and arthritis. Omega-6s together with omega-3s play crucial roles in normal growth and development, such as regulating metabolism, maintaining bone health and reproductive capacity, and stimulating skin and hair growth.

Most Americans consume about 20 times more omega-6 fatty acids than omega-3s. But many scientists believe that a ratio closer to 2-1, instead of 20-1, is more appropriate. This recommendation is based on studies showing that an excess of omega-6 tends to **increase** inflammation and blood clotting, while omega-3 tends to **reduce** both.

How can you consume more omega-3s? Eat more fatty fish (salmon, halibut, herring, sardines, and tuna), nuts, and flaxseed. The American diet usually contains plenty of omega-6 fatty acids, so we should focus our attention on increasing our intake of omega-3s.

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Herbs & Spices

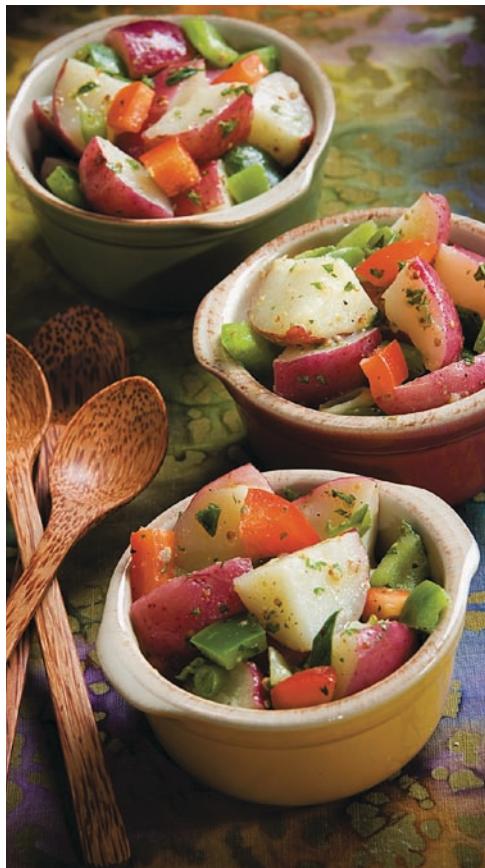
For those of us with sophisticated palates, we are always in search of food with flavor and aroma. Most Americans add large amounts of oil, salt, and sugar in their diets to add flavor to their food. Once this habit is acquired, it is difficult to start eating food with less of these ingredients. Wait a minute! Does it mean **you** have to eat “bland foods?” No, you do not. There are wonderful herbs and spices that add flavor and enhance aroma to your meals. In fact, adding herbs might increase pleasure and diversify your palate. Herbs are easy to grow at home in small pots. Grocery stores and farmers’ markets have a variety of fresh herbs you can use to add flavor. It is best to use fresh herbs, but if they are not available, add dry herbs to your meals. Treat yourself to foods with added flavor and aroma, cooked with fresh herbs this summer.

Reducing Fat: Replace fat with herbs and spices to cut down on the amount of fat. Cutting down 1 tablespoon of fat (10 grams of fat) can subtract 100 calories; just by adding herbs and spices instead of oil to your meals.

Reducing Salt: Gradually begin to replace salt with savory flavors such as black pepper, fresh garlic, curry powder, cumin, dill seeds, basil, ginger, and onion. Add basil, oregano, parsley and pepper, or use an Italian seasoning blend, to your pasta dishes. Rather than using garlic salt or onion salt, use fresh. You can chop some ahead of time and save.

Source:

“Healthy Cooking with Fresh Herbs,” University of Nebraska Lincoln Extension



HERBED POTATO SALAD

Ingredients

- 1 ½ pounds red potatoes (about 8 potatoes) cut into cubes
- ½ cup light Italian dressing
- ½ tablespoon spicy brown mustard
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh parsley
- 1 teaspoon garlic salt (or substitute fresh garlic)
- ¼ teaspoon ground black pepper
- ½ cup chopped red bell pepper
- ½ cup chopped green bell pepper
- ½ cup sliced green onions



Preparation

1. In a large pot, cook potatoes in boiling water until tender, about 10 minutes (do not overcook). Drain well and let cool.
2. Cut potatoes into bite-size pieces and place in a medium bowl.
3. In a small bowl, combine dressing, mustard, parsley, and seasonings; pour over potatoes and toss well.
4. Carefully stir in bell peppers and green onions. Cover and chill until ready to serve.

Makes 6 servings, ½ cup per serving.

Prep time: 20 minutes

Cook time: 15 minutes

Nutrition Information per serving:

Calories 132; Carbohydrate 24 g; Dietary Fiber 4 g, Protein 2 g; Total Fat 4 g; Saturated Fat 1 g, Trans Fat 0 g, Cholesterol 0 mg, Sodium 441 mg.

Source:

"Everyday Healthy Meals," Champions for Change, Network for a Healthy California

PENNE PASTA WITH SPRING VEGETABLES

Serves 6

Ingredients

- Nonfat cooking spray
- ½ cup onion, chopped
 - 2 cloves garlic, minced
 - 1 lb. asparagus, trimmed & cut into 1-inch pieces
 - 2½ cups cherry tomatoes, halved
 - 2 cups yellow squash, cubed
 - ¾ cup low sodium chicken broth
 - 16 oz. package penne pasta
 - 6 fresh basil leaves, chopped

Preparation

1. Spray a large skillet with cooking spray then heat over medium heat.
2. Add onion and garlic then cook for 3 minutes, stirring often.

3. Add asparagus and cook an additional 3 minutes.
4. Stir in the tomatoes and squash and cook for 3 minutes.
5. Add the broth and reduce heat to medium low and simmer, uncovered for 5 minutes. Add salt and pepper, to taste.
6. Cook pasta according to package instructions then drain.
7. Toss pasta with the vegetable mixture and basil then serve.

Nutrition Information per serving:

Calories 330; Fat 2.0 g; Carbohydrates 66 g; Protein 1 g; Cholesterol 0 mg.; Dietary Fiber 5 g.

Source:

Union County Health Department,
Marysville, Ohio
<http://www.uchd.net/GD/Templates/Pages/UnionCountyHD/UCHDetail.aspx?page=3&TopicRelationID=5&ContentID=539&ContentID=539>



Family Approach to Keeping Active and Healthy

When adults in the family are physically active, children adopt behaviors reinforced and shared at home. Children receiving these messages early have a better chance to become healthy adults. Adults and early childhood education (ECE) providers are in a unique position to encourage active lifestyles and promote healthful food choices.

Family activities allow adults to share with children important family lifestyles and traditions. Parents often work hard and have little time to organize family outings. Teachers and ECE providers may have opportunities to encourage family activities that are extensions of lessons. Physical activities that require

group cooperation help teach children to socialize. Encourage setting aside family days; write on a calendar the activity or outing for that day. This way a family creates a routine of shared physical activities. Engaging the children in planning these activities reinforces their importance. Working in the school garden together, walking to the supermarket to select produce, preparing meals, cleaning and putting away the dishes afterward, all can be great sources of family fun.

Spring and summer are excellent seasons for families to be active and outdoors. The warm weather provides opportunities to limit sedentary activities, like watching TV or playing computer games.



Photo: Network for a Healthy California



Funded by the USDA's Food Stamp Program through the *Network for a Healthy California*. This institution is an equal opportunity provider and employer. The Food Stamp Program provides nutrition assistance to people with low income. It can help you buy nutritious food for a better diet. For information on the Food Stamp Program, call 1-888-328-3483.

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