

Wonderful New Snacks

Childhood obesity is making headlines all over -- so I was pleased to see the mailer from my children's pediatric practice regarding the importance of healthy snacks for kids. My hope for answers dissipated quickly as I scanned the list: Fat-free ice cream, baked tortilla chips, gelatin, low-fat pudding, animal crackers, baked potato chips. The doctors took the time to single out five different types of cookies and crackers but lumped "fruit" and "fresh vegetables" into one category each. No mention of nuts, raisins or more nutritious whole foods. If pediatricians don't know nutrition, how can parents?

"Everyone gets caught up in trendy food marketing, even medical professionals," says Shereen Jegtvig, chiropractic physician, mother of two and certified nutrition specialist in Albuquerque, New Mexico. "Though many newly formulated snack foods are better than their predecessors, that doesn't mean they're the healthiest snack choices. Personally, I recommend keeping most chips and candy out of the house because, as shown in an Oxford study, high glycemic index foods just make kids hungrier," says Jegtvig, who also works as the nutrition guide for About.com.

Perhaps the most frustrating aspect of all this is that research shows that if you teach kids to eat right, they'll really do it -- on their own. In a study published in the *Journal of Pediatrics*, researchers tracked 595 children, half of whom had received, along with their parents, education on making healthy food choices. Three years later, kids who attended the nutrition classes were still eating healthier than those who didn't receive such education.

Smarter Snacks

The key to creating healthy snacks your kids will crave is making them as fun and engaging as the glitzy commercial stuff -- a challenge, considering that most moms and dads don't have multimillion-dollar marketing budgets. (Of course, restricting children's television viewing limits their exposure to these junk products -- but that's a subject for another day.) What's more, these foods are perfect for parents, too. Here's what Jegtvig and other snack-savvy experts recommend...

Fruit kabobs. Buy some shish kabob skewers and create colorful strawberry, pineapple and mandarin orange kabobs kids can grab and go. Kids enjoy making them, too.

Frozen grapes. They have the consistency of mini-popsicles, yet no added sugar and plenty of flavonoids. Just pop a bowlful of grapes in the freezer for a sweet treat anytime.

Ants on a log. Part craft project, part after-school treat. Get your kids involved in making their own snacks. Take celery sticks, smear them with light cream cheese or natural peanut butter and sprinkle with a line of raisins.

Seasoned nuts. Nuts, especially walnuts, which are rich in omega-3 fatty acids, are a perfect snack. Sprinkle with a bit of cinnamon sugar and bake 10 to 15 minutes.

Veggie chips and dip. There is no excuse for not having fresh vegetables on hand. Buy prechopped, prewashed bagged veggies. "Then give your kids a little bit of whatever dip they want," says Jegtvig. "Kids need a little fat, and fat helps you absorb many of the nutrients in vegetables, so a little ranch dip or chip dip is fine".

Smoothies. Mix half a banana, a fistful of grapes, some berries and some yogurt in a blender and make a smoothie. In the summertime, freeze the mixture to make a cool dish that's as sweet as ice cream but much more nutritious.

Rainbow melons. Slice honeydew, cantaloupe and watermelon to make a candy-colored natural treat.

Carrots and hummus. You can buy hummus in most grocery stores today, and baby carrots are sold practically everywhere. This spicy snack is rich in protein, so it's filling and helps stave off hunger.

Star fruit sandwiches. Place banana slices between sliced star fruit for funky, filling sandwiches.

PB&J. Don't shy from the classics. "Traditional kid favorites like peanut butter and jelly are still better choices than processed snacks," says Jegtvig. Just choose whole grain bread and go light on the sugary jelly.

Nuked sweet potatoes. Thinly slice a sweet potato, spread it out on a plate, sprinkle with a little salt and pepper and microwave for three to five minutes. These "potato chips" are more filling than the fried, bagged kind, and they're chock-full of beta-carotene.

Berry blends. "Anything with berries is great," says Jegtvig. Mix a bowlful of berries in season, including blueberries, blackberries, raspberries and strawberries.

Assorted seeds. Seeds are a rich source of vitamin E and some, like pumpkin seeds, have omega-3 acids. Roast seeds for extra crunch.

Make a mix. In a Tupperware container, mix whole grain cereal, such as multigrain Cheerios, dried fruit, seeds and nuts, for a trail mix that satisfies indoors, too.

Roll ups. For a heartier snack, layer thinly sliced turkey breast, spinach leaves and a light spread on a whole-wheat tortilla. Roll up and slice into tasty disks. Roll ups also work with tuna salad, refried beans and spreads such as hummus.

Think small

"Let's face it, sometimes you want a cookie and that's fine. The most important thing is portion control," says Jegtvig. "We all ate cookies growing up. There's nothing inherently bad about cookies. What's gotten out of control is the size of these and frequency of

snacks." As a rule, buy single servings of snacks like crackers, pretzels, baked chips and tortilla chips. Reserve these foods for special occasions rather than daily indulgences.

The Best Foods on the Block

Research increasingly points to inflammation as being at the root of devastating illnesses, including heart disease, diabetes, cancer and Alzheimer's disease. Normally, inflammation is the immune system's healing response to injury. It's a short-term answer to a particular situation and disappears once the problem is resolved. But in chronic inflammation, the immune system runs amok, misfiring cells at normal tissue and encouraging disease rather than healing.

The good news is that eating more healthful foods (and fewer unhealthful ones) can go a long way toward preventing or reducing inflammation and its consequences. According to Nancy Appleton, PhD, nutritional consultant and author of *Stopping Inflammation: Relieving the Cause of Degenerative Diseases (Square One)*, the best anti-inflammatory diet is one that embraces a variety of nutrient-packed whole foods and avoids detrimental choices such as refined white flour and sugar, red meat and highly processed foods. Her recommendations for an anti-inflammatory diet include...

EAT NINE (OR MORE) A DAY

Nine or more servings of fruits and vegetables, that is. The old five-a-day recommendation was scrapped in January 2005, when, in recognition of the crucial role that nutrient-dense fruits and veggies play in good health, the US Dietary Guidelines upped the ante to nine. Fresh produce such as green leafy vegetables and brightly colored fruits and vegetables are rich in antioxidants, which prevent the free radical oxidation of free radicals that leads to inflammation. Dr. Appleton especially recommends berries, which contain inflammation-dampening polyphenols, and flavonoids called anthocyanins that discourage oxidative damage.

Inflammation-fighting tip: While nine a day may seem like a lot, it's easier than you think to squeeze them in. For example, sprinkle one half cup of blueberries, blackberries or strawberries on your whole-grain breakfast cereal... munch on an apple (rich in naturally anti-inflammatory quercetin)... a handful of baby carrots or red pepper strips for a mid-morning snack... enjoy an avocado salad topped with a few shrimp and a squeeze of lemon for lunch... make a strawberry-banana smoothie for a late afternoon pick-me-up... and put together a quick stir-fry for dinner, heavy on the greens and easy on the protein. When eating your fruits and veggies, "raw is best" since some of their enzymes and antioxidants are destroyed by heating. When you do cook your vegetables, less is best.

OPT FOR FISH TWICE A WEEK

Some of the most powerful inflammation fighters come from the sea, and Dr. Appleton highly recommends cold-water fish such as salmon, tuna, halibut, trout, sardines and

mackerel. These are excellent sources of omega-3 essential fatty acids, which have potent anti-inflammatory properties. Try to eat fish at least twice a week. (Note: Pregnant or nursing women and young children through adolescents should not eat high-mercury fish such as shark, swordfish and tilefish more than twice a week. Read about mercury dangers in Daily Health News, September 6, 2005.)

Inflammation-fighting tip: If you're not a big fish eater, consider taking a 2,000-mg fish oil supplement daily. While it is best taken as a liquid, capsules are okay, too. Vegetarian sources of omega-3 fatty acids include flaxseed oil and walnuts but do not contain nearly the same level of omega-3s as the fish sources.

EMBRACE HEALTHY FATS

Other rich sources of essential fatty acids are nuts and seeds (almonds, macadamia nuts, flaxseed, etc.). Choose these anti-inflammatory healthful fats instead of the artery-clogging saturated and trans fats that abound in processed and fast foods like baked goods, chicken nuggets, hamburgers and french fries. As for oils, olive is a good anti-inflammatory choice. Steer clear of cottonseed, corn, peanut and soy oils, which contain omega-6 fatty acids. Too much omega-6 fatty acid can actually become pro-inflammatory when out of balance with omega-3s. Keep in mind, too, that minimally processed oils are always a more healthful choice than highly refined ones.

Inflammation-fighting tip: Sprinkle a tablespoon or two of flaxseed or wheat germ on your breakfast cereal, and add taste and texture to your salad with nuts and seeds instead of croutons. As for that bowl of candy or pretzels on your desk, replace it with one filled with pumpkin seeds, almonds, pecans or walnuts.

CHOOSE PROTEINS WISELY

Protein is a key part of the diet, vital to maintaining cell, muscle and tissue health. Good anti-inflammatory proteins include cold-water fish, free-range poultry with the skin removed, eggs enriched with omega-3s, beans, nuts and grains (Dr. Appleton's favorite is millet). Meat should be consumed in moderation, since it contains potentially pro-inflammatory arachidonic acid. When you do opt for meat, it's best to choose organic cuts, because chemicals from commercially fed livestock mean more work for the liver, which can result in inflammation. Preparation counts too, as frying, barbecuing and smoking cause the formation of cancer-causing chemicals called acrylamides and flare-ups of inflammation. More healthful choices are poaching or stewing.

Inflammation-fighting tip: Instead of chips and dip (packed with the saturated and trans fats that encourage inflammation), snack on apple slices or celery smeared with protein-rich hummus or peanut butter.

CUT BACK ON PRO-INFLAMMATORY FOODS

In the long run, what you don't put in your mouth can be even more important than what you do, reminds Dr. Appleton. Eating healthful foods doesn't give you a free pass to down colas or french fries covered with melted processed cheese (a disgusting combination I recently encountered at the ballpark). Avoid foods that stimulate inflammation, including simple sugars, refined white flour, red meat, fast or fried foods, food additives and partially hydrogenated oils. For many people, other hard-to-digest foods that encourage inflammation include dairy and wheat.

Inflammation-fighting tip: Steer clear of sugary soft drinks, and instead sip antioxidant-rich tea. Choose whole grains instead of refined ones, and keep dairy to a minimum. If you must have it, try goat or sheep milk products, which are less inflammatory.

CHANGING YOUR DIET

Not only will an anti-inflammatory diet help prevent a wide range of diseases, over time you'll also find that it gives you more energy and makes you feel better all around. However, don't feel obligated to do it all at once or you may get overwhelmed and quit, cautions Dr. Appleton. Make small changes. For example, start by eating fish just once a week, or replacing your breakfast bagel with whole-grain cereal and fruit. Over time, small changes add up and make a big difference.

Chocolate Walnut Shake

- 1 cup unsweetened apple juice
- 2 bananas, mashed
- 4 tablespoons whole or ground unsalted walnuts or walnut butter
- 1 cup unsweetened soy milk
- 1 ½ tablespoons pure unsweetened cocoa (or carob) powder
- 1 teaspoon pure almond extract
- 1 cup ice

In a blender or food processor, combine the juice with the remaining ingredients, and blend until smooth.