

Choose Wisely: Your Health Depends on It

Barbara L. Ames

Montgomery County Agent
Family and Consumer Sciences

Fact Sheet

The Good News

The good news is that healthy eating is not about strict rules, strange food combinations, and continued deprivation. Healthy eating is more about changing ways of thinking about food, and learning to make informed choices that promote health and disease resistance. It's about using guidelines to compare available choices and to select a balance of tasty and nutritious foods that satisfy hunger. **Dieting and eating healthy are not the same.** Helpful tools are available for consumers willing to get serious about making wiser choices and improving their health.

Choose to Use MyPyramid and Nutrition Facts Labels

The United States Department of Agriculture has developed the MyPyramid as a tool to guide more informed food selections. Users choose how these guidelines (not rules) fit into their own lifestyles, based on personal likes and dislikes. Choose which small changes to make, one at a time, in a series of "steps to a healthier you."

The Web site *MyPyramid.gov* and Nutrition Facts labels help users understand and use dietary guidelines. At *www.MyPyramid.gov*, interactive technology helps users determine the number of daily calories that are best for them. MyPyramid also helps users learn to choose the foods that supply the balance of proteins, carbohydrates, and fats needed daily to be healthy.

Users who know the core principles of MyPyramid and understand the Nutrition Facts label are empowered to make more informed food and physical activity choices.

Choose Carbohydrates Without the Extras

Some popular diet information suggests that carbohydrates are unhealthy. However, since energy from all food is nothing more than protein, fat, or carbohydrates, cutting out carbohydrates is an unwise choice. Fruits, vegetables, low-fat dairy products, and whole grains are sources of carbohydrates and are essential in providing a variety of nutrients such as vitamins, minerals, and fiber that build healthy bodies and help disease resistance.

The bad hype for carbohydrate foods comes from the fact that carbohydrate foods are often prepared using lots of added fat and sugar. So, the trick is to learn to make wise carbohydrate choices. Choose fresh, frozen, dried, or canned fruits and vegetables without added sugar or sauces, and low-fat or fat-free dairy products. Choose whole grains instead of refined grains, which have had a portion of the valuable nutrients removed in the process. Look for products with the whole grain stamp or with 100 percent whole grain listed in the ingredients label. These choices provide the greatest amount of nutrition per calorie.

Compare the sample breakfast choices in Table 1 to see the difference nutrient-rich food choices can make.

Table 1

Sample Breakfast Choice 1				Sample Breakfast Choice 2			
Food	Calories	Fat Grams	Carb Grams	Food	Calories	Fat Grams	Carb Grams
1 glazed doughnut	235	13	27	1¼ cups whole grain oat cereal	110	2	20
1 cup whole milk	150	8	11	1 cup 1% milk	100	3	12
				1 cup strawberries	45	1	10
Totals	385	21	38	Totals	255	6	42

The carbohydrate numbers are close. But, even with a cup of fruit added, the fat and calories are considerably less for Choice 2. Breakfast Choice 2 also provides more of the nutrients essential for health and resistance to disease. Consuming the 130 additional calories of Choice 1 daily over a year's time could cause more than ten pounds of weight gain.

It is wise to choose a variety of nutrient-rich carbohydrate foods first, while only occasionally enjoying calorie-dense carbohydrate foods that often fall short on nutrients.

Choose Healthy Fats

Contrary to some fad diets, a look into MyPyramid shows that up to 30 percent of daily calorie intake can be calories from fat. Saturated fats, which are typically from animal sources and are solid at room temperature, should be eaten less frequently.

Most of the fats we eat should be unsaturated fats, which are liquid at room temperature. The major source of unsaturated fats in food is oils. Oils contain “essential fatty acids” that are necessary for health. However, oils still contain calories. In fact, oils and solid fats both contain about 120 calories per tablespoon or 9 calories per gram. Carbohydrates and protein each have 4 calories per gram. Since fats contain over twice as many calories per gram, reducing the amount of fats eaten will go a long way in controlling body weight. Therefore, look for food choices that are lower in fat while still providing essential nutrients and a satisfying taste.

Check the chart in Table 2 and compare fat grams from the Nutrition Facts labels of several types of potato and corn chips.

Regular chips may be a food to choose less often. It is easy to exceed the 15 chip serving size and eat several servings at a time, greatly increasing calories consumed. Baked chips are a better choice, and salsa can be added to decrease dryness and increase flavor and nutrients. Notice that carbohydrates increase as fat is decreased in many processed foods, keeping total calories comparable. Check the Nutrition Facts label before you choose. (The Web site www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/foodlab.html offers helpful information about using the Nutrition Facts label.)

Choose Lean Protein

Daily protein is essential since it is a major building block for body tissues. However, the very high amounts of protein some diets suggest can put strain on the liver and kidneys. In addition, many meat sources of protein may also provide excess amounts of fat. Therefore, it is wise to include lean meats and beans in your eating plan and choose the moderate amount of daily protein foods suggested by MyPyramid.

Healthful Choices Can Include Favorite Foods

Most people who are successful at losing weight and keeping it off don't try to eliminate their favorite foods. A meal plan for long-term use will include foods you like to eat. Learn to choose foods sensibly by looking at the big picture. When consumed occasionally, and in the appropriate portion size, **all** foods can fit into a healthful eating plan.

For example, if ice cream is a “must have” on your list, look for ways to fit it in occasionally. Review the chart in Table 3 to see the impact that simply choosing a different product can make when it comes to calories, fat, and carbohydrates. Let the Nutrition Facts label help you choose.

Table 2

Comparison of Potato and Corn Chips				
Food	Calories per 1 ounce serving (about 15 chips)	Fat (grams)	Saturated fat (grams)	Carbs (grams)
Regular potato chips	150	10	1	15
Reduced-fat potato chips	140	7	1	18
Baked potato chips	120	2	0	23
Tortilla chips	140	8	1	18
Baked tortilla chips	120	3	.5	22

Table 3

Comparison of Vanilla Ice Cream Products			
Food	Calories per 1/2 cup	Fat (grams)	Total Carbs (grams)
Haagen Dazs Ice Cream	270	11.0	21
Haagen Dazs Light Ice Cream	200	7.0	29
Haagen Dazs Frozen Yogurt	200	4.5	31
Braums Premium Ice Cream	130	7.0	16
Braums Light Ice Cream	110	3.0	18
Braums Frozen Yogurt	120	4.0	17

Source: Web sites of Haagen Dazs and Braums

If a ½ cup serving seems too small, try blending it with a fresh peach or half a banana and a little skim milk to create a delightful, frothy treat with extra nutrients and no extra fat.

Choose More Nutrition Per Calorie

Rather than going hungry, wiser food choices call for eating three nutritious meals each day along with healthy snacks. It's about balancing physical activity with eating nutrient-rich foods, which are higher in fiber, vitamins, and minerals and lower in fat and sugar. Nutrient-rich foods offer more nutrition per calorie and help us feel full with lower calorie intake. Spending your calorie allowances on food choices that offer the most nutrients per calorie is a wise choice. It's like shopping for a bargain!

Table 4

Comparison of Nutrition Per Calorie							
Choice 1				Choice 2			
Food	Calories	Fat Grams	Carb Grams	Food	Calories	Fat Grams	Carb Grams
A piece of pecan pie (1/8 of a 9-inch pie)	431	24	53	3 ounces turkey	145	4.0	0
				1/2 cup mashed potatoes	113	4.5	17.5
				1/4 cup brown gravy	20	.5	3.5
				1/2 cup green beans	13	0	3.0
				1 cup leaf lettuce	10	0	2.0
				2 Tbsp. low-calorie Italian dressing	10	0	4.0
				1 slice whole wheat bread	70	1.0	13.0
				1/2 cup sliced peaches	35	0	9.0
Totals	431	24	53	Totals	416	10	52.0

Source: Nutritive Value of Foods, Iowa State University

Consider the comparison in Table 4. For about the same amount of calories and carbohydrates you can choose Choice 1 or all of the foods in Choice 2.

Choose Foods You Will Like

Food likes and dislikes are often a learned response and can be changed if we choose to do so. For instance, if you prefer whole milk, try drinking 2%. Research shows that taste perceptions begin to change toward lower-fat varieties after a few months. So, it's not going to be deprivation for the rest of your life. It's going to be dedication for a few months, and then your tastes will actually begin to change. Then you can begin to switch to 1% milk.

Choose to Get Motivated

We get to choose the attitude with which we face each day. We can accept the status quo or, step by step, we can choose to make positive behavior changes to help keep our bodies healthy and guard against disease. We can learn to choose nutrient-rich carbohydrate, fat, and protein foods. We can experiment with ways to include our favorite foods in our personal eating plan, and work on developing a taste for some new favorites.

The good news is that healthy eating is not about strict rules and diets. It is about learning to make wiser food choices. After all, healthcare decisions are not made just at the doctor's office or the hospital. True healthcare decisions are made wherever food and physical activity choices are made. What choices will you make today? Choose wisely – your health depends on it!

Reviewers:

Mary L. Meck Higgins, PhD, RD, LD, CDE, Professor and Specialist, Department of Human Nutrition;
M. Gayle Price, MS, RD, LD, Professor and Specialist, Family and Consumer Sciences, Southeast Area;
Janet Stephens, MS, Multicounty Specialist: Greenwood, Chautauqua and Wilson counties, K-State Research and Extension

Resources:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (www.cdc.gov)

Health Education Research, Vol. 16, No. 4, 443-456, August 2001, Oxford University Press

How to Understand and Use the Nutrition Facts Label (<http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/foodlab.html>)

My Pyramid Web site (MyPyramid.gov)

Nutritive Value of Foods, Ruth Litchfield, 1996, Iowa State University Extension publication PM1686

USDA Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2005

Web sites of Haagen Dazs (www.haagendazs.com) and Braums (www.braums.com)

Brand names appearing in this publication are for product identification purposes only. No endorsement is intended, nor is criticism implied of similar products not mentioned.

Publications from Kansas State University are available on the World Wide Web at: www.oznet.ksu.edu

Contents of this publication may be freely reproduced for educational purposes. All other rights reserved. In each case, credit Barbara L. Ames, *Choose Wisely: Your Health Depends on It, Fact Sheet* Kansas State University, July 2008.