

Daily Union Article

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Title: Food For Thought

It would be easy to assume that eating healthy becomes easier in the summer months, but that simply isn't true. Eating healthy is a choice, regardless of the time of year. Your food-related purchases reflect what you value and give you the opportunity to affect your life in a variety of ways. For instance, food choices affect health and good health can lead to substantial savings on medical expenses. Your food choices and food-related practices can also impact environmental resources. "Current food choices in the United States create a carbon footprint that is one-fourth larger than that created by American's driving habits" according to Dr. Mary Meck Higgins, Human Nutrition Specialist (ret.) with K-State Research and Extension.

Enter the concept of "sustainable" diets – diets that meet present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. How do we do that? There are a wide variety of actions you can take in regards to your food choices and practices that will contribute to a healthful, tasty, and sustainable diet. In her bulletin titled "Making Everyday Choices for a Healthy, Sustainable Diet", Dr. Meck Higgins outlines some key actions you can take on a personal level to make this idea a reality. Some of these actions can be achieved easily and quickly, while others may require a bit more planning and require intentional lifestyle changes. The trick is, you need to first commit to the idea that a healthy, tasty and sustainable diet is important to you. With that mindset in place, it is easier to take action.

**Choose nutrient-rich foods.** When you make food choices based on nutritional value, you maximize the health benefits gained from such choices. It will also reduce the use of natural resources. You will not need to eat as much which leads to savings in your food budget. Intrigued? Let me explain. A nutrient-rich diet means that you base most of your meals and snacks on whole grains, fruits, legumes and dark-green, red, and orange vegetables. Our current average daily intake of these types of foods is only half of what is recommended. Refined wheat and refined corn make up almost one-third of Americans' calories. Rather than consuming refined grains, we need 3-ounce equivalents of whole grains, 2 cups of fruit, and 2.5 cups of vegetables *daily!* Commit to choosing nutrient-rich foods as one of your actions steps for a healthy and sustainable diet with these tips in mind:

- Change cooking practices to include a variety of whole grains, bright-colored vegetables, fruits, and cooked dry beans.
- Consume at least 3 cups of low-fat dairy products each day – doubling our current our daily intake in the U.S.

- Cook at home as often as possible. When you prepare your own meals, you can control the ingredients and serving sizes. For the average American, eating one meal away from home each week equates to about 2 lbs. of weight gain per year.

**Eat locally produced foods when available.** This not only encourages your consumption of fresh foods that have not been over-processed, but also builds capacity for our local community to produce food, increase biodiversity, and improve the environmental impacts of your food choices. Buying directly from our local producers helps keep the money closer to home, rather than having most of your money for food go to large corporations or out of town business and industry. What are some specific ways you can address this action step?

- Change up your food choices based on what is in season and available locally. This will help reduce the amount of fuel needed to grow out-of-season foods in greenhouses or the amount of energy it takes to keep the food cold as it makes its way through our global food distribution process.
- Frequent local farmer's markets or local produce shops and buy food that is locally produced. In Kansas, locally produced foods include fruits, nuts, oils, honey, culinary herbs, apple cider, milk, cheeses, wild game, poultry, eggs, beef, pork, fish, lamb, goat, buffalo, sausage and so many more.
- Grow something at home for quick and healthy access to fresh produce. Try a container garden of culinary herbs in a window planter or patio tomatoes in a planter on your porch.

**Minimize avoidable food losses and waste.** Almost a third of the food produced in the United States is thrown away. As much as 14% of food purchases made for household use in the U.S. is wasted. When food is wasted in this way, it results in the loss of monetary and natural resources, not to mention the time we wasted in purchasing and preparing it. Wasted food accounts for the single largest portion of solid waste in our landfills and incinerators in the U.S. What can you do to reduce these food losses?

- Buy only what you need and can use before it spoils. The most common foods that are wasted by consumers include fruits, vegetables, drinks, bread and bakery products, dairy products, eggs, meat, and fish. Purchase food that can be consumed in a reasonable amount of time to reduce waste.
- Store your food appropriately. Perishable foods require prompt refrigeration or freezing when you get home from the store. Leftovers also need to be stored immediately after their use to ensure their shelf life is maximized.

You can save money and resources by eating a healthy, tasteful and sustainable diet. You can also support our economy by making food purchases from our local producers.

For more information about improving your health with food choices, contact me at the Geary County Extension office at 785-238-4161. Until next week, keep living resourcefully!