

Okay, so I admit it, I am a horrible planner when it comes to my weekday lunch. Negligence is no excuse, or at least that is what I tell my kids. With this in mind, I am making my New (School) Year's resolution: I will pack a healthy lunch to eat at work. Hmm... It seems something is missing in that statement.

The teacher in me knows that I have to make the goal measurable. I will pack a healthy lunch to eat at work 4 of the 5 days a week. That equals 80% - which would earn a "B" in my former classroom. That may seem like underachievement, but give me a break. It's better than flunking!

The realist in me also knows that I have to include the duration of time. I am sure my doctor, who says I need to watch my cholesterol, would say "for the rest of your life!", but I believe goals should be both realistic and attainable. I am going to shoot for a minimum of 3 months. (Note: I am supposed to go in for a follow up cholesterol test in November. I might as well achieve two goals with one action plan!)

We all know how much easier it is to give advice than it is to take it, but sometimes it helps to know the benefits behind making a change to motivate the change. In the interest of full disclosure, let me share with you what I know about why packing a healthy sack lunch is beneficial: 1) Packing a lunch using food I already have at home is less expensive than buying a lunch every day. 2) I can better regulate the amount of cholesterol, fat, simple sugars, preservatives, and calories contained in my homemade lunch. 3) I am modeling better eating habits to both my family and those I work with. 4) It will ensure that I am more likely to eat lunch if I have it ready to eat and easy to access. This is especially important since I have a tendency to work through my lunch and then snack all afternoon. 5) It can help me avoid the after lunch crash that happens when I eat a meal that is too heavy on carbohydrates and fats. Although I identified these benefits as my own, the truth is they are benefits universal to everyone, including children that we are sending off to school next week.

Brown bagging has many benefits, but even that may not be enough to convince you (or I) to implement this cost-saving practice. Sometimes it seems that brown bag menus are limited and get boring in a short amount of time. That most certainly is not the fault of the brown bag. Rather, it is the fault of the person who is packing the lunch.

My Extension colleagues at the University of Nebraska put together a list of ideas on how to keep brown-bagged meals flavorful, interesting, and healthy.

- 1) *Use a variety of foods from every food group on MyPlate.* (<http://www.choosemyplate.gov/>). Don't limit yourself to a peanut butter and

jelly sandwich thinking you have covered 3 food groups. (Jelly does not count as a fruit!) Think broader than that! If you made a turkey breast and cheese sandwich with lettuce and tomato on whole grain bread, you've covered 4 of the 5 food groups. If you add an apple or a bunch of grapes, you've completed it. Another option might be to have low-fat yogurt, an orange, a handful of roasted low-salt almonds and some sliced cucumber.

- 2) *Keep calories in mind.* Fats and sugars can quickly add more calories than you need. Lunchtime beverages and desserts are two possible sources of extra sugars and fats. If you think you are being smart by taking a green salad each day – you are right. However, look at the label on the salad dressing or the shoestring potatoes that might go on top of the salad. Salad dressings can harbor a significant amount of fat and sugars. This adds significant unnecessary calories – especially if you like to have a lot of dressing on salad. A typical portion size for salad dressing is 2 tablespoons. Some labels are sneaky, though. It might look like there are fewer calories or less fat and sugar simply because the serving size has been changed on that product. By listing the serving size as a single tablespoon, it leads the consumer to believe they are picking a low fat, low calorie product. This is true only if the portion is limited to the recommended serving size.
- 3) Use only small amounts of high-fat foods, such as butter, margarine, mayonnaise, sour cream, and fatty meats. Try low-fat substitutions or avoid using them at all to keep the brown bag lunch a healthier alternative. For example, using fat-free ranch dressing on sandwiches is a favorite alternative at my house.
- 4) Include foods with dietary fiber, such as fruits, vegetables, and whole-grain breads. Fiber helps regulate your digestive system and has been proven to aid in reducing cholesterol in the body.
- 5) Choose low-sodium foods, such as fresh fruits and vegetables and lean meat and poultry, most often. If your work is relatively sedentary (sitting most of the day), maintaining a low-sodium diet will help with fluid circulation in your body. The body's joints tend to swell when you take in too much sodium and/or stay seating for long periods of time.

Join me in setting a goal to eat healthier lunches during the week. For more lunch menu ideas, contact me at the Geary County Extension Office at 238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!