

Back to Basics with Real Foods

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CHAPTER PROGRAM 76



TAKE OFF POUNDS SENSIBLY

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Presenter Guidelines:

1. This program is designed to be presented at chapter to address the increasing amount of processed "fake" foods in our environment and to highlight the benefits of returning to "real" foods.
2. Throughout the program, you will ask members to share their experiences and ideas about centering eating habits on real foods.
3. After greeting the members, begin.

Materials Needed

- note cards, pencils or pens for members
- one loaf of store-bought bread—with value-added component such as "DHA" or "omega-3"—that also contains an extensive ingredients list, preferably including high fructose corn syrup
- a copy of the seasonal food calendar PDF (preferably in color) downloaded from <http://eatseasonably.co.uk/what-to-eat-now/calendar/>

Think about your last trip to the grocery store and all of the new, remarkable, and reformulated foods you saw for sale. Our stores feature more fat-free chips, high-fiber yogurts, sugar-free sodas, and omega-3 eggs than ever! As an increasingly health-conscious public emerges, food manufacturers are racing to stock shelves with innovative and perceivably healthy foods.

Then why is it that, as our interest in healthy eating increases, our nation is actually getting fatter? The most recent CDC obesity statistics from 2009 cite an overall obesity prevalence of greater than 30%. That's up from 23% in the late 1980s. In that period, we have seen low-fat and low-carb diets come and go. Each diet trend brings with it new and exciting food products, each more processed and refined than the next.

The end result is a food environment laden with fake food. Most consumers cannot identify—let alone pronounce—the ingredients in many of the products they buy. And, considering that more than half of every food dollar is spent outside the home, we are more removed than ever from real ingredients and real foods produced by real people.

Today, we are going to discuss getting back to basics and rediscovering real foods. We'll work together to identify the sources of artificial, processed, "fake" foods in our food choices and begin building a meal plan centered on whole, real foods.

[Distribute note cards and pencils/pens, if you are providing them.]

Recipe Recall

Think about a loaf of basic, home-made bread. Even if you're not a world-class baker, write down the ingredients that you think you would use to bake a loaf of bread at home. Nothing fancy, just a standard bread you would use for making sandwiches.

[Give members a few minutes to write down ingredients on note cards. Then, go around the room taking one ingredient suggestion from each participant.]

What are the main ingredients used in bread? There are many variations, but the traditional six ingredients are: water, yeast, sugar, salt, flour and fat.

Now, take a look at the ingredient list of this loaf of store-bought bread.

[Show ingredient list and read or circulate package so participants can read label.]

What do you notice that is different about this package of bread compared to your ingredient list? For starters, there are WAY more than the six ingredients you need to make bread. Many are unfamiliar, chemical-sounding ingredients—these are the preservatives, emulsifying agents, dough conditioners, and mold inhibitors. If you look hard, you can find the basic six ingredients, but there's much more in there, too!

[Describe the bread in this manner, as it applies to the loaf you brought in... In this bread, there is added DHA, an essential omega-3 fatty acid found naturally in fish and fish oils and known to be beneficial for human cells, including those in the heart, lungs, nervous system and, most notably, the brain. It's why fish is sometimes called "brain food." Now, why would you need to get a nutrient found naturally in fish added unnaturally to your bread?]

According to the USDA's Economic Research Service, there are more than 10,000 new food products introduced into the US market each year. This means food manufacturers are under huge pressure to introduce new and innovative items that can justify a higher price point.

If we are going to get back to basics, we must first acknowledge that, to food manufacturers, we are the pipeline to their profit margins. If we are uneducated about nutrition science and end up buying new and more expensive products that we think are more healthful than traditional foods, they win!

Manufacturers are not concerned about your health or your waistline; they want you to buy value-added foods you perceive to be healthy at a higher price than you would pay for that food's traditional counterpart.

Revamping Value-Added Foods

Let's go around the room and each mention a value-added food we have seen lately at the grocery store. My contribution is the DHA omega-3 bread.

[Solicit ideas from the members. Suggestions can include items such as: vegetable-based cheeses, meat-free corndogs, low-carb tortillas, low-calorie juices, etc. Ask members how the value-added versions differ from traditional foods.]

All of these items purposely stray from their original ingredient makeup. These foods are usually priced higher than their traditional counterparts and, in some way, have been formulated to make you think they are healthier than the regular versions.

One of the first steps in getting back to basics with real foods is abandoning the notion that value-added foods automatically convey a nutritional advantage. Here are a number of popular, reformulated, food claims to avoid, along with some better advice on how you can obtain those nutrients or health benefits.

Immune-enhancing: Recently, a major ready-to-eat cereal manufacturer was brought to task by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) for promoting a cereal they claimed would boost immunity. What loving parents wouldn't want to pay a little more for a cereal that might fend off colds and illnesses for their children? The reality is that malnutrition and insufficient nutrient intake lead to impaired immune function. The opposite does not hold true—eating more nutrients does not increase immunity. Having a balanced diet containing fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and moderate amounts of meat and low-fat dairy promotes optimal immunity. Puffed rice cereal does not!

High-fiber: Fiber is one of the few things of which you can always afford to have more. We should aim to have 25 to 38 grams of fiber per day, but most of us get less than 15 grams of daily fiber. Fiber is found naturally in fruits, vegetables, whole grains and legumes. Those foods are cheap, so manufacturers have (not surprisingly) found ways to incorporate fiber

into more expensive foods that do not naturally contain fiber. These include things like high-fiber cottage cheese, ice cream sandwiches and artificial sweeteners. When it comes to fiber, get yours from the naturally-occurring sources and leave the fake fiber on the shelf.

Heart-healthy: Food companies pay the American Heart Association for the privilege of displaying their “Heart Check Mark” logo on foods. The reality is that foods in packages are packaged foods, and packaged foods are processed foods. The more processed a food is, the further removed it is from real ingredients. The real heart-healthy foods like fruits, vegetables, whole grains and legumes, don’t come in fancy packages—but that does not mean they are any less heart-healthy! In general, it is best to avoid front-of-package labeling claims. The truth is on the side of the package in the Nutrition Facts Label and the ingredients list.

Ingredient List Landmines

In his book, *In Defense of Food*, food journalist and author Michael Pollan unknowingly set off a new trend in food marketing. Pollan recommended that, in order to reduce intake of unhealthy, processed foods, readers should avoid eating foods with more than five ingredients.

While, in theory, this is an excellent idea because most of the non-nutritious foods in our stores are laden with long ingredient lists, consumers took it quite literally. Food manufacturers quickly retaliated with dumbed-down ingredient lists of traditionally unhealthy foods. They knew consumers were looking for short ingredient lists and were not necessarily concerned about what was in that ingredient list.

Shortly after this five-ingredient list trend caught on, a well-known premium ice cream company introduced a line called “Five,” featuring unhealthy, high-fat, high-sugar ingredients. One half cup of this ice cream has more than 200 calories, 11 grams of fat, and more than a third of a day’s saturated fat intake...but it only has five ingredients...does that make it healthy?

As savvy shoppers, we have to use common sense: is an ice cream really so healthy that it should replace fruit as your go-to dessert? Just because an ingredient list is brief does not mean that food is healthy—and a lengthy ingredient list in no way means a food is unhealthy. There is no hard and fast set of rules for eating. We have to choose foods we like in quantities that

we know will not be harmful to our bodies.

Successful Shaving

How can you cut back on the amount of fake foods you eat while replacing them with more wholesome alternatives? I’ll share a few ideas with you and then we can brainstorm to come up with some more.

Shop frequently: Processed foods have long shelf lives. Manufacturers love that because it reduces spoilage, waste and lost profits. If you are going to commit to eating more real foods, you may have to shop more frequently. Produce and whole grains go bad if not eaten relatively close to purchase time. Whole grains contain the germ, and the germ contains fat. Anything that contains fat will go rancid more quickly than a fat-free food.

Plan menus: Cooking as often as possible at home is the best approach to battling your weight. But what to cook? Try to plan your upcoming week’s meals with a brief menu outline. Use online recipe sites to select healthy, whole-food meal ideas and generate shopping lists. Avoid shopping on an empty stomach and stick to your list!

Stock smartly: One of the most complimentary things a hungry neighbor in your kitchen can say is, “There’s nothing to eat here!” If you avoid stocking your pantry with ready-to-eat snack foods, you’re on the path to whole foods success! Keep only ingredients intended for use in making food and meals. Meals and snacks should be planned so you never have to eat on an impulse.

Count it out: When most people think of snacks, they think of something that comes from a bag. Train yourself to think of fruit as your go-to snack. If you can eat two pieces of fruit as between-meal snacks per day, you will help curb hunger, limit sugar cravings, and are less likely to overeat at the next meal. But that means you have to count—if you are going to the grocery store to cover food for the next three days, and if there are three people in your family, and all three of them need two pieces of fruit for snacks per day, that’s 18 pieces of fruit! It might sound like a lot, but the actual cost to you is likely less than if you were to purchase prepared, packaged, snack food for 18 separate snacks.

Sometimes saving hurts: The newspaper coupon section has become ground zero for advertising new, value-added foods. Rarely do you find coupon inserts for healthy, whole foods. Instead, they are for newly-released, expensive, and unnecessary processed foods. Bulk food stores can also do damage as they stock primarily packaged and processed foods. If you do go to bulk stores, stick to shopping only for fresh produce, meat, grains, and low-fat dairy foods.

What are some other ideas that you have to help reduce fake food intake while increasing real food consumption?

[Go around the room soliciting ideas from members.]

Think Seasonally and Locally

As our society has become more reliant on restaurants and convenience foods to provide meals, we have become less aware of where our food originates. Even if you don't have a green thumb, it doesn't hurt to know which foods are in season when. This helps assure that you are purchasing produce at its peak, and usually when it's inexpensive.

There are great seasonal fruit and vegetable calendars available online. They can give you ideas about meal planning and encourage you to make fruits and vegetables the centerpieces of your meals.

Take a look at this seasonal calendar:

[Circulate copies of printed out "Eat Seasonably" downloadable calendar from <http://eatseasonably.co.uk/what-to-eat-now/calendar/>]

Based on the calendar, which fruits and vegetables are in season this month?

[Have each member choose an available fruit or vegetable and then make a suggestion of a meal that could be created from that food. Examples include: Eggplant can become eggplant Parmesan. Corn can become low-fat creamy corn chowder. Cabbage can become an Asian chicken coleslaw dish.]

Farmer's markets are another excellent resource for the whole-food minded individual. The availability of processed and packaged foods here are minimal. You are surrounded (and inspired!) by vibrant, fresh and in-season produce. Talk to growers and see how they recommend preparing their fare. Look for recipe cards that vendors might offer. Shop toward the end of the market, when sellers are more likely

to negotiate on price rather than taking their leftover produce home.

Make Mealtime Fun and Enjoyable

Preparing three meals a day, seven days a week, is an overwhelming task for even the most organized planner! Ease your burden and increase your food fun factor by trying some of these tips:

- Organize a supper club where, once a month, a group of friends rotates making dinner for the group, each sharing recipes with the other participants.
- When cooking meals, prepare extras and freeze leftovers.
- Chop vegetables as soon as you return from the store and put them front and center in your refrigerator, where they are easily accessible as snack foods.
- Join your local chapter of Slow Food (www.slowfoodusa.org or www.slowfood.ca). This organization aims to "link the pleasure of food with a commitment to community and the environment."
- Research online whole food and real food communities and read their blogs. A great one is "Real Food Has Curves—The Real Food Blog" at www.realfoodhascurves.com, where the authors of Real Food Has Curves: How to Get Off Processed Food, Lose Weight, and Love What You Eat share recipes and whole food tips.

You can turn a blind eye to the fake foods in our world! With a little ingenuity and perseverance, it is possible to embrace a real-food diet. Returning to whole foods feels good: your efforts will yield environmental, financial and, most importantly, health benefits now and for years to come.

Good luck to you as you embark on your quest to return to real food!