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FAMILY MEALS MONTH

August is Family Meals Month, a good reminder to make family meals a priority. As school starts back and family life becomes more structured, put dinner on your “To Do” list. The benefits go beyond better nutrition. Eating together as a family fosters better communication, better school performance, and better adjustment.

With busy schedules for both parents and children, this may seem impossible. A 2007 USDA study titled Who Has Time to Cook? found that working women spend less than an hour preparing meals each day. That’s not just dinner, that’s all three meals, all day. That figure for “preparing meals” includes not just time cooking the food, but also serving, clean-up, and storing food and drinks.

Women working full-time spend on average 42 minutes a day, part-time working women spend 55 minutes a day and non-working women spend 70 minutes a day in these activities. I have never met a non-working woman, they either work outside of the home, in the home and/or in the home without pay! Just reading these figures raises my blood pressure. What about the men in the household, with a few exceptions…..where is it written that women are the cook? These statistics drive home the need for quick, easy meal ideas – with few pots and pans to wash afterward.

In my work as a nutrition educator I often hear parents express concern about what their children will eat. I understand that frustration as I raised one son who ate anything I served, another who simply did not want to eat, and a third son who ate only one vegetable.

Frequently I see mothers become short order cooks which makes mealtime even more stressful. My advice…..stop fretting over what’s on the menu and just make sure there is a menu. I’m not advocating a diet of fast food and take out. Meals can be simple – soup and sandwiches, breakfast foods, pasta meals, casseroles, salads and fresh fruit.

Ask each family member what their three favorite meals are and keep these ingredients on hand. Plan a two week cycle of menus. For instance Monday could be leftovers from the weekend, Tuesday pasta, Wednesday a crock pot dish, Thursday soup and salad, and Friday splurge on pizza or take out.
Save the weekend to prepare meals that take more time and ingredients. Keep all types of fruit in the house (fresh, frozen, canned, and dried) for a naturally sweet and nutritious dessert.

Here are 10 tips for quality family meals:

1. Aim for three or more meals a week
2. Make family meals a priority
3. Keep a sense of humor and laugh a lot
4. Cook it quick but eat it slow
5. Work toward happy, relaxing conversations at meals
6. If time’s an issue, make meals quick and easy
7. Shop for food and cook together
8. Take telephone calls later
9. Turn the TV off!
10. Respect each individual’s right to decide how much and what to eat

One of my very favorite resources for parents is www.eatright.org sponsored by the Academy for Nutrition and Dietetics. Find easy and healthy recipes listing nutritional content. Some recipes include watch and learn videos demonstrating how to prepare the recipe.

Enjoy these simple tasty recipes utilizing fresh seasonal produce.

**WATERMELON AND TOMATO SALAD**

2 cups cherry tomatoes, washed
2 cups watermelon, cut in cubes
1/2 cup fresh basil, washed and chopped
1/2 cup reduced-fat mozzarella cheese, cut in cubes
1 tablespoon lemon juice
1 tablespoon vegetable oil
Salt and black pepper to taste

In a large bowl, add tomatoes and watermelon. Add basil, cheese, lemon juice, and oil. Mix to combine and season with salt and pepper to taste. Chill in the refrigerator before serving. Makes 4 (1 cup) servings. Goes great with grilled chicken.

**BERRY GOOD PIZZA**

100% whole wheat pizza crust or 12-ounce can of refrigerated pizza dough
1/4 cup apple butter
6 strawberries, washed and sliced
1/2 cup blueberries, washed
Cinnamon, optional

Preheat the oven to 350°. Roll out pizza dough to desired size, if used. Place dough or pizza crust on a baking sheet or pizza pan. Spread the apple butter over the crust. Arrange berries on the pizza crust. Sprinkle with cinnamon, if desired, and bake for 15-20 minutes until crust is brown and crisp. Optional ingredients: raisins and honey. Children will enjoy helping put this pizza together! Makes 6 (1 slice) servings.
CEASAR CHICKEN

1 pound chicken breast
1 bottle reduced-fat Caesar salad dressing

Slice chicken breast into strips and marinate in salad dressing over night. Drain chicken and discard left over salad dressing. Sauté strips in nonstick skillet for 15 minutes or until done. Serve on top of salad as your main entrée OR with side dishes like baked potatoes, broccoli, etc.

GRILLED HAM

1 slice center cut ham

Grill for 5 minutes on each side. Serve with grilled peaches or pineapple.

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