More often than not, the centerpiece of our meal is the meat. Meats are excellent sources of protein. Necessary for many body functions, protein helps build and repair muscle and bone tissue, fights infections, helps heal wounds and regulates enzymes and hormones.

There is no reason to eliminate meat from a balanced diet, but the meat group is the second largest contributor of fat to the American diet. Therefore, it is beneficial to incorporate alternative lowfat sources of protein into your weekly eating habits.

Creating meatless meals may require some extra thought, more so than meals you prepare in a typical week. However, increasing variety provides nutritional benefits, and there are many low-calorie, lowfat non-traditional meats or meat alternatives to consider making a part of your culinary repertoire.

Eggs are highly nutritious and are excellent sources of high-quality protein. Furthermore, they are inexpensive, convenient, easy to prepare and easy to chew. In a study conducted by the United States Department of Agriculture, eggs were rated as one of the cheapest sources of high-quality protein at a cost of only eight cents per egg.

Need a quick dish to serve as a main meal? Prepare eggs with grain products, such as grits and toast, and serve with sliced tomatoes, fruit and lowfat milk for a balanced meal.

Soy protein is another option for a lowfat meat alternative. Soy burgers are available in the freezer case, and soybean curd, tofu, is generally found in the produce department. Several varieties and textures of tofu are available. Tofu alone has very little taste but cooked in recipes it takes on any flavor that has been added to it. A very versatile food, tofu can be added to spicy chili or chocolate cheesecakes.

Dried beans and peas serve as meat substitutes because of their protein and iron content. Beans are a nutritious powerhouse as they are high in complex carbohydrates, protein and dietary fiber; low in fat, calories and sodium; and completely cholesterol free. Just one half cup of beans added to the daily diet can help you reach important nutrition goals.
Bean soups can serve as a hearty main dish meal. If you choose to add meat to your soup, you will need less meat than if you were serving meat as your entrée. This will help decrease the cholesterol and calories as well as the cost of your meal.

Want to use beans but forget to plan time for soaking? Use canned beans in your bean recipes. Rinse and soak them before using to decrease the sodium content without reducing flavor. Black beans, black-eyed peas, butter beans, garbanzo beans (chickpeas), kidney beans, lentils, lima beans, navy beans, pinto beans and split peas can all be used to create lowfat dishes that are high in protein.

Add variety to your diet and explore new flavors by adding more meals that include meat alternatives. You can decrease cholesterol, calories and cost by including some plant-based meat substitutes in your diet on a regular basis.

Developed by Danielle A. Gordon, Family & Consumer Sciences Agent II, University of Florida/IFAS – Leon County Extension, 5/05. The Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences is an equal employment opportunity/affirmative action employer authorized to provide research, educational information and other services only to individuals and institutions that function without regard to race, color, sex or national origin.