

Good Food Can Be Convenient: Good, Simple Meals Can Be Convenient

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With the fast-paced lifestyle that is common among most people these days, it is difficult for many to make the time to prepare a healthy meal. It is easier to grab something quick and convenient, justifying a less healthy option for better use of one's time. For example, it's better to spend a few extra minutes with family or friends than to spend that time in the kitchen slaving over a healthy meal made from scratch. Therefore, many of today's kitchens are used to assemble meals rather than for cooking.

Most convenience foods are high in saturated fats, sodium and sugar and provide little to no nutritional value. According to new research from the Center on Everyday Lives of Families at UCLA, families are not relying on convenience foods for quicker meal preparation as believed. Rather, these pre-packaged foods allow families to eat more elaborate meals than they would normally take time to prepare. Researchers found that there was little difference in the time it took for families to prepare meals with little or no convenience foods compared to meals made with a lot of convenience foods.

A better choice is to purchase ingredients to keep on hand that will aid in preparing simple, healthy dishes. Fill your refrigerator with a variety of fruits and vegetables that you enjoy eating. Apples, oranges, peaches, grapes, celery, onions, peppers, broccoli and squash are all great choices. Every time you visit the grocery store, pick up some fresh fruits and vegetables from the produce department. Keep a few flavorful sauces on hand that are low in calorie, fat and salt. Other items to keep on hand include maple syrup and honey. They add a lot of flavor and just a touch of sweetness when used sparingly. Canned tomatoes are great in many food dishes. Canned no-salt-added beans can be used as a substitute for dried beans. If you have room in your pantry, keep an extra jar of the items you use the most, such as mustard, reduced-fat mayonnaise or honey. Keep a variety of pastas and rice available for easy meal ideas.

When you do purchase convenience foods, be selective. Read the food labels and look for healthier choices. Some food manufacturers have created lower-sodium varieties that are now available. Most of us should limit our sodium intake to no more than 2,400 milligrams per day. In selecting convenience food items, choose those with no more than 600-800 milligrams per serving. Keep total fat, saturated fat, trans fat and dietary cholesterol to a minimum.

Try these tips to make convenience foods a healthier choice:

- Prepare seasoned rice or frozen stir fry, using only half of the seasoning packet. Save the remaining half for another meal and add to plain rice or use as seasoning for slow cooked meats.
- Use only half the margarine called for in boxed mixes of rice, pasta, stuffing mix and macaroni and cheese.
- Add chopped vegetables (cooked, frozen or canned) to frozen pizzas, soups and spaghetti sauce for a healthier meal.
- Dilute bottled salad dressings and marinades with vinegar and water. Creamy dressings can be diluted with buttermilk by individual serving.

Fresh, whole foods, such as whole grains, fruits and vegetables are healthy and convenient. Choose these most often. Consume other convenience foods in moderation. Make time for healthy choices and prepare fast and convenient meals that are lower in fat, sodium and sugar.

Quick Chili

Makes 4 servings, about 3/4 cup each.

1/2 pound lean ground beef
15 1/2-ounce can kidney beans, drained (save liquid)
1/3 cup bean liquid
1 cup "no-salt-added" canned tomato puree
1 tablespoon instant minced onion
1 1/2 tablespoons chili powder

Thoroughly cook beef in hot frying pan until browned throughout. No pink should remain in juices. Drain off fat. Stir in remaining ingredients. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat, cover and simmer 10 minutes.

Serve a salad of mixed greens with reduced-calorie dressing, purchased whole-wheat rolls and juice-pack canned pineapple chunks.

Sources: A. Henneman, FoodTalk Newsletter, University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension in Lancaster County. The Cleveland Clinic Heart and Vascular Institute. Maine Coast Memorial Hospital. Iowa State University. The Wall Street Journal Health Journal.