Give your body the balanced nutrition it needs by eating a variety of nutrient-packed foods -- those packed with vitamins, minerals, fiber and other nutrients and low in calories -- every day. During National Nutrition Month®, celebrated in March, the American Dietetic Association (ADA) reminds everyone that an easy way to eat better is to start with the basics: build your nutritional health “from the ground up”.

Most of us know a healthful diet is an important part of a healthy lifestyle, but most people have trouble figuring out what to do when planning a diet overhaul. The 2010 theme of National Nutrition Month®, “Nutrition from the Ground Up” means choosing more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains to create a healthful eating plan. “By starting slowly and giving yourself a good foundation, you can work towards a healthier life,” says registered dietitian and ADA spokesperson Toby Smithson.

Current guidelines call for eating at least three whole grain servings per day where a serving is one slice of bread or ½ cup of pasta. For fruit, recommended guidelines vary with age and activity. The average amount is two cups per day or two pieces of fruit. When it comes to vegetables, 2 1/2 cups of vegetables per day is the minimum for most adults. Recommended amounts of food from each of the food groups varies with gender, age, weight and activity level, so check out the www.MyPyramid.gov website for your personal guidelines.

Take time during National Nutrition Month®, to evaluate the amount of fruits, vegetables, whole grains you eat, and if you are lagging behind, these tips from ADA may help:

- Consider topping your pizza with more vegetables, like broccoli, spinach, green peppers, fresh tomatoes, mushrooms and zucchini to add more variety and nutrients. If you make your pizza at home add whole wheat flour to the crust.
- Mix up a large batch of smoothies. Use no/low fat milk, frozen strawberries and a banana or two. Portion into smaller containers and refreeze for ready-to-go breakfasts and snacks.
- Make veggie wraps using whole-wheat (check the label) tortillas and roasted vegetables and low-fat cheese.
- Instead of chips try veggies with your favorite dip or low-fat salad dressing.
- If grilling chicken or fish, add vegetable kabobs packed with tomatoes, red, yellow and green peppers, mushrooms and onions to the grill.
- Make your salads colorful – use dark leafy greens, top with baby carrots, grape tomatoes, fresh or canned fruit; like orange slices, grapes or strawberries. Don’t forget to include beans and peas such as kidney beans or split peas in your salads.
- Make it a habit to top your morning oatmeal or ready-to-eat cereal with fresh, frozen or dried fruits, a few almonds or walnuts and sprinkle of cinnamon.
- Try an unfamiliar whole-grain for fun – be adventurous! Consider quinoa or millet. Create a hot side dish by adding sautéed vegetables or serve the cooked grain cold after marinating it with salad dressings.
- Stuff a whole grain pita bread with turkey, cranberries, sliced pears or apples for a new twist on lunch.
- Don’t forget about popcorn -- it is a perfect whole grain snack provided it’s popped without oil. Instead of a butter topping add almonds, dried fruit and cinnamon for flavor and extra nutrition.

Remember we can move toward better health by taking small steps. We do not have to do everything at once. Celebrate National Nutrition Month® by trying one of these suggestions each week and celebrate a move to a more healthy eating plan.
Source and for more National Nutrition Month® information: See the American Dietetic Association website, http://www.eatright.org/nnm/ For additional nutrition information: See http://www.fruitsandveggiesmatter.gov/ and http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/topic_child_nutrition

If you have a question, write to Jo Shuford-Law, Extension Agent Family and Consumer Sciences, University of Florida/IFAS Extension--Leon County, 615 Paul Russell Road, Tallahassee, FL 32301-7099; or call the Extension Office 487-3006, between 8 a.m. to noon or 1 to 5 p.m. weekdays.

The University of Florida/IFAS Extension--Leon County 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.