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Dare to Care Series
Part I: Smart Food Choices
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Your Life Your Health
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As we approach the beginning of a new year, resolutions related to healthier living typically surface. However, putting these resolutions into action, as the cliché, goes . . . seems all too “often easier said than done.” I believe, though, that half the battle is won through empowerment with knowledge of why making a healthy decision is so important for the here and now and for longevity. And the other half can be won by what we choose to do and not to do. The important roles we each play and choices made in our daily lives as individuals impact the well-being of our family members, friends and loved ones, and community at large indeed often with far-reaching effects on a local, national and global scope. This will be the first of a series of articles geared towards preventive medicine and public health.

What's in a label?

With the holidays fast upon us, we will begin with a discussion of nutrition and smart food choices. Will this put a damper on the celebratory festive feasting? There's no reason for it to do so. Just be smart about it. So, let's begin . . .

Everyone can benefit from certain healthy principles of eating. One of which is to know what's in our foods. Reading food labels can guide us in the right direction. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration mandates a standardized label to be placed on the majority of prepared foods, such as canned or frozen foods, cereals, breads, snacks, and beverages, whereas labeling of fish and fresh fruits and vegetables is voluntary. The first thing to look at on the label is the portion size that a serving consists of, and how many portions come in a particular package of food. A food label's information is always based on what is *one* serving, and without noticing this, calorie counting is often futile and inaccurate. Also, when comparing different brands of the same food in terms of their caloric value, you need make sure you take into account what each label states is the serving size for one portion.

Next, we need to look at how many calories are in *one* serving of the food. A calorie is term used to indicate how many units of energy are in the food type. Typically, 1 gram of fat contains 9 calories whereas 1 gram of protein or carbohydrate has only 4 calories. But, don't be fooled, a low-fat or a sugar-free or a fat-free food is not synonymous with a calorie-free food; it just means that it is lower in content of that particular substance.

As you scroll down the label, a breakdown of contents in the food is listed, namely fats, cholesterol, sodium, potassium, carbohydrates, protein, vitamins and

minerals. In general, one what's to try to decrease the intake of saturated fats (typically coming from solid fats like butter, margarine, lard, or fatback) and trans fats in order to lower one's risk of heart disease and stroke. Foods such as vegetable oils, fish, and nuts that are lower in the fats named above, and higher in monounsaturated fatty acids and polyunsaturated fatty acids are better substitutions for your heart's health. Cholesterol is a substance that comes from animal products, and can cause premature hardening and clogging of the arteries, thus putting a person at risk for heart attacks, strokes and poor circulation. Being selective about the types of foods that come from animals that you choose to consume such as lower-in-fat milk and dairy products, and choosing leaner cuts of meats can help a person maintain a healthy cholesterol level.

Sodium is another word for salt and this substance can sometimes contribute to high blood pressure and fluid build-up around the heart and in the legs if consumed in greater than tolerated amounts. The American Heart Association recommends that healthy adults eat no more than 2,300 milligrams (mg) of sodium daily, which is approximately equal to 1 teaspoon of salt. I will define the following terms designated by the Food and Drug Administration which may sometimes appear on food labels: Sodium-free labels represent foods containing less than 5 mg of sodium per serving. Very low-sodium labels stand for foods with no more than 35 mg of sodium per serving. Low sodium foods represent those with no more than 140 mg per serving; reduced sodium having a decrease by 25 % of the sodium that usually appears in that particular food item; and no salt added or unsalted or without added salt are terms designated for no artificial/manmade addition of salt to the food product.

Potassium is a dietary mineral and electrolyte (a charged particle in body fluids) which the body requires for good cell functions to occur. The Institute of Medicine recommends 4700 mg of potassium for intake of most healthy adults in order to see the benefits such as lowering blood pressure, reducing one's risk of developing kidney stones and decreasing bone loss. However, it is important to note that some people may need to limit their dietary intake of potassium based on pre-existing health conditions such as kidney disease, for instance, and therefore should discuss nutritional recommendations with their healthcare provider.

Carbohydrates are divided into dietary fiber and sugars. Limiting simple sugars such as what comes from very processed foods such as white rice, potatoes, and flour, and focusing on fiber-rich foods such as barley, whole wheat, brown rice, whole oats, legumes, fruits and vegetables will help not only in bowel regularity, but will also help to reduce one's risk of heart disease and to maintain healthy glucose (sugar) levels in one's bloodstream.

Protein is a substance built from amino acids, which are tiny building blocks that the body needs to function properly. Some of these amino acids are generated by the body itself, but some must be acquired by dietary intake. Most Americans get their dietary intake of protein from beef and poultry, but one still needs to be savvy about the dietary choices made. Leaner cuts of meat, skinless poultry, and baking, broiling or grilling instead of frying these meats will allow one to gain the benefits of the protein while limiting their fat intake. Other good protein-rich sources of food include fish, yogurt, beans, nuts, low-fat milk and cheese.

On the right-hand side of the nutrition label is a column labeled % Daily Value. This tell you what percentage of recommended nutrition a serving of the food type yields,

and is usually based on a 2,000 calorie per day food plan for an individual. For example, if the serving size of 1 cup yields 12 grams of fat, this will represent 18% of the fat that a person should intake in a day, which for a 2,000 calorie a day diet, should be 65 grams of total fat per day. This may seem not feasible or impractical to have to calculate such numbers, but take heed, a general principle to remember is if the label says 5% or less for a % daily value, then that particular food item is considered low in that nutrient. And if the label says 20% or higher for a % daily value, that food item is considered to be high in content for that nutrient.

So, the next time your kids ask for something sweet, choose a piece of fruit or a serving of sugar-free pudding or a serving of low-fat ice cream and check the label to see how much a recommended serving size is. When preparing a meal, look to use various spices to season and go easy on the salt, especially while seated at the table. When donating foods to those in need, look for nonperishable good forms of grains and canned goods that are lower in sodium content. For those who choose to achieve healthy weights, remember that losing a pound requires decreasing one's daily caloric intake by 500 calories a day for 7 days in a row. This may seem like a high number, but really once you start to look at labels, you'll see that it can be achieved by simply cutting out higher in calorie foods or cutting down in portion sizes. A trick for the eye when reducing portion sizes is to use a salad plate for a main meal rather than a larger dinner plate. It can appear like a lot of food when filled, yet give you less calories that you consume. Work at filling 2/3's of the plate with colorful fruits and vegetables, and the remaining 1/3 with a protein and grain. Exercise in moderation and with the recommendations of one's healthcare provider, is also an integral part of maintaining a healthy body weight and lifestyle.

Indeed, 'tis the season to be jolly.. . Now and always 'tis the time to dare to care for your health and for the health of others.

More information about health food choices and servings can be obtained on through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's website: mypyramid.gov and the Food and Drug Administration website: www.healthierus.gov/dietaryguidelines.

Remember, it is your life and it is your health!