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Eat Right ... Navigating the Grocery Store

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The theme for this year's National Nutrition Month (March) is "Eat Right..." So I would like to talk about eating right ... by navigating the grocery store. After an exhausting day at work, you walk to into your kitchen and realize that you have nothing to cook for dinner. It's time to make a quick trip to your neighborhood supermarket. After choosing a metal chariot, you scan the aisles and are immediately captivated by colors, logos, and sure bargains. Without much thought, you begin to place a jar of spaghetti sauce, organic breakfast cereal, and two tubs of ice cream (BOGO: Buy One Get One Free) in your cart. Before you know it, you are at the check-out paying for a pile of items that you did not intend to buy.

Does this sound like your usual trip to the grocery store?

For many of us, when it comes to grocery shopping, we often enter the store without a plan. But if we truly want to eat right – keeping our health in mind, perhaps the first step is to shop for our food prepared using a clear strategy and our health in mind.

Here are a few tips to navigate your way down the aisles:

1) WRITE A SHOPPING LIST

- **Make Mini-Lists for the Food Groups.** This technique will help you keep balance and variety among all food groups. If you notice that your column for grains/cereals is full and the column for fruits/vegetables is bare, reconsider your choices.
- **Plan Your Meals in Advance.** Mapping out your meal plan for the upcoming week will be well worth the extra five to ten minutes out of your busy schedule. By deciding on what to cook ahead of time, you will have more control to make healthier choices and increase your efficiency in the kitchen.
- **Stick to Your List.** A shopping list is a visual reminder of why you visited the supermarket. Instead of making impulse buys when passing the bakery, pick up the items on your shopping list and head straight to check-out.

2) KNOW THE LAY-OUT OF THE STORE

- **Find Fresh Foods Along the Perimeter.** In most grocery stores, sections such as produce (fruits and vegetables), dairy, meat, and fish are always located on the outer aisles. Stay along the walls in order to find fresh quality food items.
- **Steer Clear of Junk Food in the Center of Attention.** Junk food is often strategically placed in the center aisles as these are high-traffic customer areas. Avoid these lanes in order to help fight against temptation.

3) SCOPE OUT THE INGREDIENTS

- **Know Why the Ingredient Order Matters.** Ingredients are listed in the descending order. In other words, the first ingredient listed is usually what is found in the highest percentage in the food product.
- **Pay Attention to the First Five Ingredients.** Beware if any of the first ingredients are: partially hydrogenated oil, High Fructose Corn Syrup (HFCS), and sugar (also known as glucose, sucrose, fructose, galactose, maltose, molasses, maltodextrin, and fruit juice concentrate). To eat healthy, it is not recommended to consume these components in high quantities. In fact, research has shown a correlation between HFCS intake and onset of chronic diseases such as obesity and diabetes.

4) BUY A VARIETY OF FRESH, FROZEN, AND CANNED PRODUCE

- **Buy a Combination of Fresh, Frozen, and Canned Produce to Provide the Best Mix of Essential Nutrients**
 - i) **Fresh** – Though fresh produce has the highest nutrient levels at time of purchase, nutrient loss occurs quickly depending on exposure to temperature and relative humidity. For example, refrigerated green beans lose as much as 75% of vitamin C within seven days of storage. Consume fresh fruits and vegetables within a week of purchase. If you are interested in buying organic produce, aim to purchase items in which the skin will be eaten or may have had direct contact with pesticides. Examples include: apples, peaches, pears, celery, strawberries, cherries, grapes, spinach, lettuce, and potatoes.
 - ii) **Frozen** – Before placed in the supermarket freezers, vegetables at peak of ripeness undergo blanching and flash-freezing. This process initially preserves nutrient quality, but prolonged storage time still causes breakdown.
 - iii) **Canned** – The unique canning process promotes enhanced release of certain nutrients. For example, higher levels of lycopene, a well-known antioxidant, are found in canned tomatoes than fresh tomatoes. Canned produce is an excellent and inexpensive source for nutrients. Before cooking or eating, rinse and drain the liquid in the can which may be packed with sugar or salt.

5) SEARCH FOR WHOLE GRAINS

- **Don't Be Fooled By the Color.** Just because a loaf of bread is brown does not mean that it is “whole grain.” It may be artificially enhanced with caramel food coloring or molasses but contain no fiber.
- **Prioritize Whole Grains and Fiber.** Look at the ingredients and double-check that the word “whole” describes that grains that come in first.

6) DIVERSIFY YOUR DAIRY PRODUCTS

- **Make the Transition to Healthier Milk.** Choices like skim, 1% or 2% milk will have less fat compared to whole milk. If you are accustomed to whole milk, slowly transition by decreasing the fat content each week and let your palate adjust to the lighter version.
- **Search for the Low-Fat.** Similar to milk, we should shy away from regular cheeses and try low-fat alternatives. You may be surprised that your favorite cheese could still have the flavor that you love, but without as much fat content.

7) CHOOSE LEAN MEATS

- **Watch for Meat Marbling.** When choosing beef, you may notice white streaks across the meat. This “marbling” is actually fat throughout the meat cut. Select beef with the least amount of marbling in order to avoid a high-fat protein.
- **Pick “Round,” “Loin,” “Select” or “Choice” Meat.** These keywords mean that they are the leanest cuts of meat and will contain less fat than “Prime” cuts.

Though these are only a few concepts, they provide the basic guidelines to entering the grocery store confidently and with a healthy mission. When we know how to shop healthy, it becomes easier to eat healthy. And when we can eat healthy on a regular basis, we know that we are heading towards a healthier and happier lifestyle.

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