**Healthier eating is a lifestyle choice, says K-State extension agent**

Johnson County’s Reinberg says popular diet plan encourages heart-healthy foods

*By Pat Melgares, K-State Research and Extension news*

MANHATTAN, Kan. – The growing popularity of a plan that encourages people to eat more healthy foods and less added sugars is not really about getting rid of specific foods in the diet completely, says a K-State Research and Extension agent in Johnson County.

Chelsea Reinberg notes that the Mediterranean diet “is really more about an overall lifestyle and making small changes to eat more nutritious foods and less of the not-so-nutritious foods most of the time.”

“Typically, when you hear ‘Mediterranean’ you think of the region or a specific cuisine, when – really – eating the Mediterranean way is focused on a holistic approach to incorporating healthy protein and healthy fats. It’s also about eating more fruits, vegetables and whole grains; incorporating nuts and seeds; and eliminating added sugars.”

Reinberg – a nutrition, food safety and health extension agent – says some studies have shown that eating nine servings of fruits and vegetables a day could reduce a person’s risk of cardiovascular disease by as much as 60%.

“Antioxidants, which are found abundantly in fruits and vegetables, are really important for heart health, as well as overall health,” she said. “So when we eat these foods, we’re talking about getting the most bang for our buck.”

‘Heart Healthy’ fats – such as avocado oil and olive oil – are more friendly to the heart than saturated fats like butter and lard, according to Reinberg.

Reinberg added that as we inch closer to spring and summer, a greater variety of fruits and vegetables will become available, making it easier for people to incorporate them into their diet.

“One of the problems with fruits and vegetables is that many people do not like the taste or texture,” Reinberg said. “But there are a multitude of ways that you can cook vegetables to make them tasty. As we get into the warmer months, grilling fruit and vegetables can be a great way to add a different flavor profile. Roasting them in the oven, or sautéing them in a pan are also great options.”
“The one thing to be aware of is that we don’t want to cook fruits and vegetables for long periods of time. The longer they’re exposed to heat, the more that those traditional benefits – vitamins and minerals – can be lost.”

Some heart-friendly whole grains include brown rice and whole wheat flour. Beans, legumes and other high fiber, high protein foods are also good for the heart and overall health.

Reinberg said a traditional Mediterranean diet encourages eating fish or seafood 2-3 times a week. Fresh fish is a good option but may be more expensive. Frozen and canned varieties are beneficial as well and may be more budget friendly. If buying canned products, choose low-sodium options. Meats can be part of the diet, though consumers should choose leaner options.

All of those recommendations, Reinberg says, fall into the traditional way of thinking about a Mediterranean diet, “and help us eat a healthier diet whether or not the individual is purposefully following the Mediterranean style.”

Reinberg recently talked at length about healthy eating and the importance of physical activity on living a longer, healthier life on the weekly radio program, Sound Living, produced by K-State Research and Extension. The program is available online.

More information about healthy eating also is available at local extension offices in Kansas.

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Story by:
Pat Melgares
melgares@ksu.edu

More information:
Chelsea Reinberg
Chelsea.reinberg@jocogov.org
913-715-7000