K-State nutrition expert says Americans eating better, but still a ways to go

CDC survey highlights improvements in American’s diet habits

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

MANHATTAN, Kan. – It’s been said that an apple a day will keep the doctor away.

Imagine, then, what an apple and orange and banana might do.

“People who eat five fruits and vegetables per day decrease their risk of death by 13%, and lower their risk of death due to heart disease or stroke by 12%,” said Priscilla Brenes, a K-State Research and Extension nutrition specialist.

“And,” she adds, “you can decrease your risk of getting cancer by 10%.”

Brenes cited a June, 2024 article outlining results of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey. The article’s main premise is that American’s diet – once given a grade of ‘F’ – has improved slightly. It’s now considered a ‘D.’

In recent years, “people in the U.S. have changed their diets a little bit, which includes decreasing their intake of processed meats and sugary beverages,” Brenes said. “But while doing that, they have not increased their intake of fruits and vegetables, whole grains and nuts. All of these provide a lot of nutrients, vitamins, minerals and fiber that our bodies need to stay healthy.”

Slowly, grocery stores and restaurants are filling shelves and menus with foods that are more healthy, Brenes said.

“People in the U.S. are starting to get the message that we need higher quality ingredients,” Brenes said. “We need higher quality meals, including more fruits and vegetables. And people are asking for that at restaurants or when they go to the supermarket.

Consumers also are more informed, she said.
“They know what to look for in the nutrients or ingredients that are on the food label,” Brenes said. “They know that when they go to a restaurant, they can see the amount of calories in a given meal.”

Brenes noted that Americans should refer to a graphic known as MyPlate, the U.S. government’s official symbol of the five food groups.

“When sitting down to a meal, half of your plate should be fruits and vegetables, one-fourth should be a grain – half of those should be whole grains – and then one-fourth of your plate should be a source of protein, whether that is an animal or plant protein,” Brenes said.

When thinking of total servings consumed, Brenes provided some examples of what makes one serving:

- One medium apple, peach or nectarine.
- One-half cup of frozen, fresh or canned fruit or vegetables.
- One-fourth cup of fruit juice, or one-half cup of vegetable juice.
- One cup of leafy greens (lettuce or spinach, for example).

To aid in getting the required number of servings for each food group, Brenes suggests pre-cutting fruits and vegetables for snack time; cooking at home more often; or purchasing fruits and vegetables that are more easy to ‘grab and go.’

Brenes said that local extension offices in Kansas can provide more information on SNAP-Ed and other nutrition education resources and programs. Local extension agents can also provide information on classes available within the community.

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FOR PRINT PUBLICATIONS: Links used in this story

MyPlate (U.S. Department of Agriculture), https://www.mypyplate.gov

K-State Research and Extension statewide offices, https://www.ksre.ks-state.edu/about/statewide-locations

Kansas SNAP-Ed, https://www.k-state.edu/ks-snaped

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