** Recipe for Success: Small changes can make favorite foods healthier **

K-State expert shares tips on what to look for in healthy recipes

MANHATTAN, Kan. – It has been well documented during the COVID-19 pandemic that Americans spent more time eating, working and cooking at home.

And, for many, that included many more visits to the family's favorite recipe book.

Recipes are fun, but "they are also a science," said K-State Research and Extension northeast area family and consumer sciences specialist Sharolyn Jackson. "You can make some modifications and tweak recipes in some cases, but in a lot of baked goods, for example, those measurements are based on scientific proportions. So, being accurate and following the recipe is really important."

Jackson, though, knows that science is ever-changing.

"I'm reminded of a favorite quote: 'Science is not the truth; science is finding the truth. And when science changes its opinion, it didn't lie to you. It learned more.'

"I think about that because good nutrition is a very new science in comparison to many other sciences."

Jackson pointed to the fact that nutritionists once advised people to choose a low-fat or nonfat diet.

"That science has changed because now it's not just that you look at low-fat or nonfat foods, but it's the type of fat in that food," she said. "We always knew there were different types of fat, but years ago we thought they were processed the same in the body, and now we know they are not.

"We recommend now that people use unsaturated fats, rather than saturated fats. Things that we told people years ago to avoid, we now say to eat these because they're good for you, even though they have fat in them."
Those types of changes have helped form guidance for how to adapt time-tested recipes, some of which may have been passed down through generations of families.

Jackson offered the following thoughts on choosing healthy recipes, or adapting existing recipes to make them healthier:

**Look for veggies.** “We know that fruits and vegetables are important in the diet, and the recommendations for how much to include have actually gone up over the years,” she said.

Jackson said one idea is to look for recipes in which vegetables can serve as a main dish, “and then if you want meat with the meal, add a side dish of fish, grilled chicken or the occasional red meat.”

“Instead of making the meat the main dish, make the vegetables the main dish.”

**Use whole grains.** If a recipe calls for white rice, consider substituting brown rice or another grain. “You can experiment a bit even with some of the ancient grains,” Jackson said. “And, think about mixing grains; go half and half with pasta and rice, or half white/half whole grain pasta or rice.”

**Use whole wheat flour instead of white flour.** This is an easy substitute for any recipe that is not leavened by yeast, including cookies and quick breads. If your family is not keen on traditional whole wheat flour, use white whole wheat flour, Jackson said.

**Bake it to make it.** If a recipe calls for frying a food, bake it instead, and avoid breading, which adds fat and calories.

**Cut the sugar.** Use one-third to one-half less sugar in recipes for such goodies as cookies, muffins and quick bread. “If there’s a recipe that you use often, such as a family recipe, start by reducing maybe one-fourth of that sugar,” Jackson said. “Then, each time you make the recipe, but out a little more and not how much you used each time.”

“When you get to the point where that recipe is not working anymore, or your family may not like it, then you know that’s how much you can cut out. Alter the recipe from there on.”

That same strategy can be used in cutting back on salt, Jackson said.

**Substitute herbs and spices for salt.** Herbs and spices can be more pleasing in many foods. Jackson said many people’s taste buds are trained for salt, but with small changes, they can be re-trained to enjoy certain herbs and spices in foods.

**Choose dark greens.** Iceberg lettuce is the most popular type of lettuce, but it’s mostly water. “If you’re going to use iceberg lettuce for a salad, load it up with a lot of other vegetables – tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers and more,” said Jackson, who suggests such leafy greens as spinach, mixed greens, arugula and kale.

**Eat Mediterranean style.** This is a diet choice that incorporates fruit, vegetables, nut seeds, fish and leaner meats and lots of vegetables.
Jackson said many K-State Research and Extension agents are incorporating similar guidelines into healthier recipes offered in local programs. “When we, as extension agents, provide a recipe to the public through an education program,” she said, “we know that it has been thought through…and it’s a healthy recipe for your family.”

Jackson said newer versions of recipes also include important food safety reminders, such as washing hands and produce, and avoiding cross contamination.

For more information on recipes and other programs available from K-State Research and Extension, contact your local extension agent.

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