Sweet Treat? Go ahead, says nutritionist, but in moderation

Healthy eating includes a variety of foods, says K-State’s Brenes

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

MANHATTAN, Kan. – When it comes to eating healthfully, most people would presume that includes saying ‘no’ to cookies, cakes and other sweet treats.

Not so, says Priscilla Brenes.

“Our bodies like variety,” said Brenes, a nutrition and wellness specialist for K-State Research and Extension.

“As humans, we might like snacks, and we do need to be mindful on making the healthy choice the easy choice. Good health does not mean that you cannot eat the cookie or the breakfast bar that’s made of ultra-processed cereals. But you also need to have healthy options for you and your family that are easy to grab and consume."

She said fruits and vegetables and other healthy snacks are certainly important, but enjoying other foods – including those that may not be quite as healthy – is acceptable when done in moderation.

“Those foods may remind you of an event in your life that brings comfort to you,” Brenes said. “It’s important to have a good relationship with food, which means you have moderation in everything you eat. There are foods that are more nutritious than others, and you need to eat more of those foods. But you also have a space where you allow yourself to have a good relationship with foods that you simply enjoy yet might not be as nutritious.”

The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics annually recognizes March as National Nutrition Month in the United States. Brenes said the month should help Americans focus attention on the importance of making informed choices and developing sound eating and physical activity habits.

In 2024, the Academy’s theme for National Nutrition Month is ‘Beyond the Table.’
“What that means,” Brenes said, “is that we should focus not only on the nutrients that food can bring to our body, but also the impact to our community and to the farmers growing that food. We should know and understand where our food comes from. And we should recognize not just what the food is doing to our body now, but also how our purchasing behavior affects the community around us, or the effects that restaurants and other food service providers have on the community.”

Brenes said some ideas for celebrating the effect of food production on a community’s health includes taking children to a local farmers market, starting a community garden, or – more simply – a window sill garden at home.

“When children are exposed to that type of education, they’re more likely to consume food that is healthy,” Brenes said. “As parents, we should include them in food preparation, or trying a new recipe, because they are more likely to try the recipe even if it’s new because they were involved in the process of making it.”

For daily health, Brenes also encourages the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s dietary guideline known as MyPlate, a symbol of the five food groups. In general, one-half of one’s plate at any meal should include fruits and vegetables; one-quarter each for grains and proteins; and one serving of dairy.

“It can be challenging to eat five portions of fruits and vegetables in a day if we don’t plan for it,” Brenes said. “So, before you go to the grocery store, sit down and plan the fruits and vegetables you want to eat, and ask your family what they’d like. That planning can help your purchasing behavior.”

More information on health and nutrition also is available at local extension offices in Kansas.

-FOR PRINT PUBLICATIONS: Links used in this story
Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, https://www.eatright.org

National Nutrition Month, https://www.eatright.org/about-national-nutrition-month

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

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

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Story By:
Pat Melgares
melmagares@ksu.edu
For more information:
Priscilla Brenes
pbrenes@ksu.edu