The importance of good nutrition

Eating a healthy diet is important for everyone, at every age. Children and teenagers need good nutrition to support their growth and development. Adults also need to eat well to support good health throughout their lives. Modern lifestyles can present a challenge to making good decisions about diet and nutrition.

Healthy diets include the vitamins and minerals that our bodies need to operate and stay healthy. In addition, a healthy diet provides enough calories to give us the energy we need to function each day. When our diets are deficient in nutrients or provide too few or too many calories, we can develop health problems.

The United States Department of Agriculture urges Americans to establish healthy calorie limits and exercise goals – while also eating a diet rich in fruits and vegetables, lean proteins and whole grains. We are also encouraged to cut unnecessary salt, sugars and fats from our diets. Individuals who are pregnant, nursing a baby or who have a medical condition should speak with a health care provider about special dietary needs they need to keep in mind.

How faith communities can support good nutrition

There are several ways that faith communities can support good nutrition and healthy eating. Clergy and lay leaders can learn about nutrition resources within their local communities: health clinics that offer dietary advice, grocery stores that employ dietitians, food banks and pantries and home meal delivery services.

In addition, faith communities can review community meal menus to be sure a variety of healthy, delicious foods are offered. Pastoral care teams can work with shut-ins, new parents and the ill to help with grocery shopping and meal preparation. Parish nurses and educators can provide educational programming and literature to the congregation that emphasizes the important of good nutrition.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for the food that we grow, prepare and share with others. Help us remember those around the world who struggle to get the food they need. Amen.


Ways to improve your diet

Struggling to eat a healthy, balanced and delicious diet? You aren’t alone. Our busy lives can make it difficult to eat mindfully and healthly. Below are some ideas for improving the way you and your family eat. You don’t have to adopt all these ideas at once. Try making one change at a time.

✦ Learn how to cook. Cooking for yourself and your family saves money and provides maximum control over your diet. Grocery and health food stores often host cooking classes, as do hospitals, park districts and adult education programs.

✦ Read nutrition and ingredient information. Many restaurant menu items and prepared foods, even those that appear “healthy,” can be surprisingly high in calories while offering little if any nutritional value.

✦ Learn how to “eyeball” portions. Most of us don’t carry a food scale around with us during the day, making portion control difficult. One option is to compare the size of a food item to the size of everyday objects. For example, a three-ounce portion of meat or fish is about the size of a deck of cards. A half cup of mashed potatoes or ice cream is the size of a tennis ball.

✦ Keep a food diary. Keeping track of what you eat can help ensure that you get the calories and nutrients that you need. Free online and mobile food diaries, such as MyFitnessPal.com, allow you track the foods you eat and to set goals for getting the right amount of fiber, carbs, protein in your diet.

✦ Stock up on healthy food. You and your family are more likely to eat a nutritious diet when there is healthy food in the house and prepped to eat. Plan shopping in advance. Develop a list before heading to the supermarket, and never shop while you are hungry.

✦ Talk to your doctor and/or a registered dietitian. Your doctor can let you know if there are certain foods you need to avoid, help you set realistic weight goals and provide direction on whether you need to take nutritional supplements. A registered dietician can help you develop a healthy eating plan and teach you strategies for sticking to it for the long pull.