

FAST, Convenient and Healthy Meals

By Debbie Richardson, MA, RD / Optimal Nutrition

www.optimalnutrition4U.com

With the start of the school, hectic schedules typically bring about a decline in the nutritional value of meals served in the home. This month we'll focus on a few foundational concepts and techniques that will enable you to whip up a tasty meal in a hurry and not succumb to the "sins" of poor nutrition.

First, the basic components of a healthy meal include:

- Main entrée
- Whole grain food
- Fruit and vegetable
- Beverage (low/no fat milk, water, low/no calorie options)

Second, convenient and healthy side dishes are a key component of the nutritional content of the meal. Adding creative yet easy-to-prepare sides can significantly reduce the overall fat content and boost nutrient levels of the total meal. Remember, 75% of your meal should be veggies, fruits, and/or grains. Here are some suggestions:

- Take advantage of ingredients in the produce section that are chopped/shredded for you like vegetables, fruits and salad items.
- Using fresh salad greens in a bag, add nuts, sliced apples, berries, oranges, dried fruits, pre-shredded/chopped veggies, feta, parmesan, reduced fat (2%) shredded cheddar cheese or garbanzo beans. Top with no/low fat dressings.
- Serve pre-packaged and pre-washed veggies plain or with a lite dressing for dipping.
- Slice some of God's "prepackaged" foods such as a melons, apples, oranges, bananas, berries, etc.
- Choose canned fruit in its own juice or light syrup but drain the fruit from the juice before serving.
- Check out the frozen foods aisle for side dishes such as vegetables, potatoes and rice. Many of these you simply heat in the microwave.
- Potato side dishes include Simply Potatoes, baked potatoes cooked in the microwave and served with I Can't Believe It's Not Butter Spray. Trader Joe's mashed potatoes or frozen potato wedges.
- Many brown rice side dishes are available that are already prepared and ready to warm up in the microwave. Check out Trader Joe's frozen fried rice options.
- 100% whole wheat bread/rolls make an easy whole grain addition.
- Add a glass of skim milk, which adds some much needed calcium to a meal.

Options for main entrées are many. Here are some suggestions:

- **Trader Joe's Mandarin Orange Chicken**- toss with some frozen Chinese vegetables.
- **Frozen cheese/veggie pizza** – add a fruit and veggie.
- **Trader Joe's Frozen Turkey Meatballs** – add your favorite BBQ sauce, fruit, veggie and whole grain.
- **Tyson Chicken Nuggets** – serve with a veggie, fruit and a glass of skim milk.

- **Sloppy Joe's** – add pureed mixed veggies to the sauce before adding to the lean ground beef.
- **Trader Joe's Spanikopita** – simply bake this traditional Greek delight and serve with a salad and fruit.
- **Breakfast for dinner** – scramble eggs with pre-chopped veggies and or lean meat of choice. Serve with whole wheat toast and fruit of choice.
- **Healthy Choice or Lean Cuisine frozen dinners** – add a fruit, veggie and skim milk.

For more ideas, go to FoodTV.com and check out “30 Minute Meals” and “Semi-Homemade Cooking.”