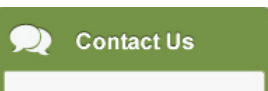


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Take a Bite Out of National Nutrition Month

By George Hulse, Vice President of External Affairs, Healthfirst



March is National Nutrition Month, and this year's theme is "Enjoy the Taste of Eating Right." I want you to hear more about healthy eating from a very important Healthfirst® partner, nutritionist and Veggiecation founder Lisa Suriano. Veggiecation is a culinary nutrition education program that teaches people about the health benefits of vegetables and how to prepare vegetables in an affordable and delicious way.

George Hulse: What do you think are the biggest opportunities to improve Americans' diet?

Lisa Suriano: The biggest issue is that Americans have gotten so far away from their kitchens and preparing their own food and have come to rely on a lot of packaged food, frozen dinners, and takeout.

There can be some really wonderful takeout from restaurants; however, we don't know how that food is being prepared, and most of the time it's being prepared in a way that's much more calorie dense than we need it to be. Getting people back into the kitchen, learning about their food, and being able to prepare it in a really healthy way is one of the biggest successes we can have in terms of this country's obesity epidemic.

Hulse: In light of this year's National Nutrition Month theme, how can you add flavor to foods without adding fat and calories?

Suriano: I absolutely love that theme. There's a misconception that eating healthy is boring or that you have to eat the same thing every day. That's the problem with a lot of these structured diets—you eat the same things over and over again. Eating healthy can be extremely exciting as you get comfortable with seasoning with dry herbs, fresh herbs, and spices. We're so lucky in America to be exposed to so many different cultures and flavor profiles that getting comfortable with them can help make some light and satisfying meals that are not heavy in oils, fats, and calories.

Hulse: What are your favorite go-to spices?

Suriano: I'm really big on Latino flavors. I use a lot of cumin, chili flakes, and ancho chili powder. Bringing a little spiciness is good for the metabolism. I explore a lot with different Indian flavors, working with different curries, turmeric, and garam masala. There are so many different intense flavors that you can bring food to life with. I'm of Italian descent, so I like my oregano, parsley, basil, and lots of garlic, too.

Hulse: For those who are looking to lose weight, what are three things they can do immediately to improve their health?

Suriano: The easiest thing to do is to cut out sweetened beverages and really focus on hydrating yourself with pure water. Don't move to diet soda, either. The artificial sweetener actually makes us crave sweet more. Just sticking to pure water and adding things like slices of orange, lemons, limes, strawberries, or herbs can excite your palette and will keep you reaching for the water bottle.

The second is to start cooking and get back in the kitchen. The Internet is a great place for recipes. If you're eating out five days a week, try to pare that to three days a week. Try to get in the kitchen the other two days and make some simple things yourself.

Lastly, getting on some sort of fitness routine that is manageable, exciting, and fun for you is important. Moving our bodies and burning those calories is really key to jump-starting weight loss.

Hulse: What are the best ways to lose weight and keep it off for the long term?

Suriano: I don't believe in a structured diet. The key to long-term, sustained weight loss is really finding things that work for you and not restricting yourself to one diet or cutting out a particular food group that you love. Listen to what your body is craving nutritionally, which is called intuitive eating, and listen to when your body is hungry and feed and snack appropriately. And stop when you're full. Once people get that dialogue with their body, they won't overeat.

Hulse: The Paleo Diet has gotten quite the buzz lately. What are your thoughts about it?

Suriano: I don't really adhere to any diet that cuts out a food group, and the Paleo Diet does that to a certain extent. I think it's a little dangerous for people because when you restrict, you then end up binging. In terms of the principles of the diet, it

...the same dangers for people because when you restrict, you often end up eating... in terms of the principles of the diet, it focuses on whole foods with an emphasis on fruits, vegetables, starchy vegetables, and lean proteins. A lot of the principles are really strong, but people have to be careful not to overly restrict themselves.

Hulse: Any final thoughts?

Suriano: People should realize how critically important their food intake is and appreciate their bodies for all the things they can do. If you come at it from that perspective—of loving your body by nourishing it properly and not saying “I want to be skinny” or “I want to be sexy”—if you think about it more as loving your body, I think that’s a really good approach to nutrition.

George Hulse is Vice President of External Affairs at Healthfirst. For more tips on leading a healthier lifestyle, visit the Healthfirst website at www.healthfirst.org.

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