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5/30/08

Smart Snacking For a Healthier Summer

When school is out for the summer, many parents are faced with a houseful of hungry children. Parents of older children who may stay at home during the day while the parents work also will be dealing with children preparing their own snacks during the summer months. Smart and healthy snacking can bridge the gap between meals.

When snacking is done properly it can keep your whole family energized. The trick is to avoid foods that are high in fat, processed foods and foods that offer little nutritional value. Whether your children are riding bikes, playing sports, swimming, or tend to participate in inactive pastimes like reading, television, playing video games or using the computer during the summer months it's important to keep a stock of healthy snacks on hand. Fruit, string cheese, low-fat yogurt, cereal bars, graham crackers, goldfish crackers, pretzels, light microwave popcorn and low-sugar fruit or fudge bars are quick and easy snacks.

One of the key elements of snacking, as well as eating regular meals, is keeping an eye on portion size. Take the time to prepare single-serving snacks. Put single servings of acceptable snacks such as grapes or pretzels in the snack size zipper bags. Making single-serving snacks readily available can help eliminate a "free for all" over a large bag of chips or crackers.

Many snacks such as yogurt, crackers, cheese sticks and applesauce can be purchased in single-serve size. These types of products are especially handy for families who are always on the go, however they will cost more. In addition, it's important for parents to set a good example when it comes to snacking. Older children may ride their bicycles to the local convenience store and purchase snacks that aren't healthy. By modeling good food choices, children are more likely to make wise choices for themselves.

When it comes to choosing a snack, encourage children to pick fruits or vegetables first. There is a wide variety of fresh produce available during the summer months. Fruit smoothies are an option for getting in several servings of fruit per day. Another good idea is peanut butter on rice cakes, apple slices, celery sticks, pretzels and crackers. If children insist on snacking on cookies, try fig bars, gingersnaps or vanilla wafers in place of chocolate chip cookies.

A selection of fruit, coupled with wooden skewers can make great tasting fruit kabobs for children. Vanilla yogurt makes a fun dip for the fruit. Fresh vegetables also can be used with a healthy dip. Keep in mind that younger children will need adult supervision when putting the fruit or vegetables on the skewers.

While the kitchen can get a good workout during the summer months, make sure children get a workout as well. Exercise goes hand-in-hand with healthy eating. Many local recreation departments offer a variety of summer sports for youth. Try to encourage some type of physical activity for at least 30 minutes every day.

When done correctly, healthy snacking can actually help with weight control and prevent sharp fluctuations in blood sugar. Simply making the snacks healthy and accessible are key elements of a healthy summer. The Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service offers its programs to all eligible persons regardless of race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, or status as a veteran and is an equal opportunity employer. Information given herein is for educational purposes only. References made to commercial products or trade names are with the understanding that no discrimination is intended and no endorsement is implied. Oklahoma State University, U.S. Department of Agriculture, State and Local Governments Cooperating.