

# A

## djusting Recipes for Healthier Living

---

Carol Olson, RD, CDE  
*Extension Specialist, Diabetes Education*

Healthy living can mean changing the way families cook and eat. Sometimes a family member is diagnosed with a chronic illness. If the illness is heart or blood vessel disease, a person may be told to avoid fatty foods and cut down on sodium. If it is diabetes, the doctor may tell a person to follow a special diet that avoids excess sugars, fats, and calories. Other families decide to make changes before excess weight results in chronic disease.

**What changes do families need to make to be healthier?** Nutrition experts suggest that a healthy diet includes cutting back on high-fat and high-sugar foods and eating more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Adjusting portion sizes can do this, but adjusting recipes also can help.

**Are all fats bad for us?** Two kinds of fat should be avoided as much as possible to lower the risk of blood-vessel disease. Those kinds are *saturated fat* and *trans-fatty acids*. Saturated fat is found in foods that come from animals, like fatty cuts of meat, whole milk, cheese made from whole milk, and lard. When you are cutting down on saturated fat, start by choosing the very leanest cuts of meat. In beef those are from the loin or the round. Trim all the fat that you can see from beef, pork, veal, and lamb. Try to use chicken or turkey more often than you use red meat. Most of the fat on chicken is attached to the skin, so remove the skin from chicken before cooking.

Saturated fat is also found in some shortening, such as coconut oil or palm kernel oil. Trans-fatty acids are found in stick margarine and solid vegetable shortening. One way to cut down on these fats is to avoid shortenings that are hardened or hold their shape at room temperature.

**What can we use instead of saturated fat and trans-fats?** Liquid vegetable oils are healthier than solid shortenings. The healthiest fat is

*monounsaturated fat*, found in olive and canola oil and certain nuts. It is good to use in salad dressings and for browning foods.

**Why can't I just leave all the fat out of recipes?** Removing all the fat in recipes can cause some problems. Fat, or shortening, helps to make cookies, cakes, and pies tender. When fat is taken out of a recipe, the flour and liquids mix too easily and make strands of *gluten*. Gluten is tough and stretchy and is what gives bread its shape and chewy texture. That won't do for muffins or cakes.

You can replace up to  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the fat in a recipe with fruit puree, such as mashed bananas, apple butter, or strained prunes. If you replace all the fat with fruit, the muffins or cake will likely taste gummy. Leave about  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the fat in each recipe to balance the fruit and coat the flour well.

**What happens if I just cut down on the fat in our favorite recipes?** Most of the time you can cut out half the fat in recipes without changing the taste or quality of the final product. Also cut back slightly on sugar, or your product will be gummy.

When you are cutting back on fat, use small amounts of familiar-tasting fats. One teaspoon of real butter added to 1 tablespoon canola oil can be used to brown chicken in a nonstick skillet. The butter will flavor the chicken without adding much harmful fat.

**Aren't nuts high in fat?** Nuts are high in fat, but the fat is a healthy kind. Small amounts of nuts can give a rich taste to recipes. The fiber in nuts is good for us also. Try browning the nuts in the oven before adding them to recipes. This brings out the most flavor.

**What about reduced-fat margarine? Can it be used for frying or baking?** Reduced-fat margarine is made by adding water to stick margarine. It is

lower in total fat and has less harmful fat than regular stick margarine. Because it contains water, reduced-fat margarine will splatter when it is melted, so it doesn't work well for frying. Graham cracker crusts and crumbled toppings are good places to use reduced-fat margarine.

### **Can I use fat-free spreads in baking or cooking?**

The best place for fat-free spreads is on sandwiches, rolls, or toast. These spreads are made from water, milk, or whey. When they are heated, they splatter and burn. If they are used for baking, they can make foods soggy.

**What other products are useful for lower fat baking?** If you cut out more than  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup fat in baked recipes, try adding  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup buttermilk, fat-free sour cream, or nonfat yogurt. All of these choices add some moisture and lots of flavor to low-fat recipes. Add 1 tablespoon cornstarch or flour to  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup of nonfat yogurt to keep the yogurt from separating when it is heated.

Regular cream cheese is very high in fat. Reduced-fat cream cheese has about a third less fat and is great for baking. It will not change the taste of recipes. Be careful when cooking with fat-free cream cheese, however. It is usually made with gelatin or other thickeners that become runny when they are beaten or heated.

One of the best substitutes for cream is evaporated skim milk. Another good choice is fat-free half-and-half. This product is made from skim milk, but looks and tastes very much like old-fashioned coffee cream. Both of these products taste creamy and work very well in soups, sauces, and pasta dishes.

### **Are there some other tricks to low-fat baking?**

Try using nonstick baking sprays to coat baking pans and skillets. They work great and come in several flavors. Use a quick spray on top of food before it goes in the oven to help brown low-fat recipes. When changing familiar recipes to low-fat ones, try using cake flour or pastry flour in place of all-purpose flour. The lighter flour will make more tender cakes, muffins, and pastry. Don't forget to try parchment paper or waxed paper to line cake pans and cookie sheets. Your low-fat desserts will peel off easily when you are done.

Be sure to look for toll-free telephone numbers or Internet addresses on the packages of reduced-fat or fat-free cooking products. The manufacturers of these new products have developed special recipes and tips designed to make the best use of the products.

**Should we give up chocolate desserts?** Unsweetened baking chocolate is high in saturated fat. You can replace 1 ounce of unsweetened baking chocolate with 3 tablespoons of baking cocoa to make healthier chocolate desserts. When you do this, be sure to add 2 tablespoons buttermilk, nonfat yogurt, or fat-free sour cream to replace the moisture in 1 ounce of baking chocolate.

**My recipe calls for eggs. What should I use instead?** One large egg can be replaced by two large egg whites. If a recipe calls for more than one egg, try using one whole egg plus two egg whites for each additional egg. Packaged egg substitutes work well, but they are much more expensive than separating and using fresh eggs. Check the price of medium eggs. If they are inexpensive, use  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup medium egg whites to replace one whole large egg or two large egg whites.

**Our family also needs to cut back on sugar.** When a family member has diabetes, eating too much sugar can be a problem. That doesn't have to mean giving up sweet-tasting foods. Sugar substitutes can work well in home cooking. They are known by many brand names, but the generic names are saccharin, aspartame, acesulfame K, and sucralose. They are different in the way they act in cooking.

Saccharin and acesulfame K do not lose their taste during baking or heating. They can give food a bitter taste if a large amount is used in recipes, so they work well in recipes that need just a little sweetener. Aspartame has a very good taste, but it does not work well for baking or slow cooking. Combining two types of sweetener saves money because you can use less. When aspartame is mixed with either saccharin or acesulfame K, the taste is much sweeter than when each is used alone.

Sucralose is a very new sweetener. Made from sugar, it is used just like sugar in recipes. New recipes for using sucralose will be available when it has been around longer. Try looking at the Internet

site ([www.sucralose.com](http://www.sucralose.com)) for recipes and ways to purchase this new sweetener. Herbal sweeteners also are available, and some have been used for many years. Because they are not sold as food additives, they have not had the same careful testing as the four sweeteners listed above. This does not mean that they are unsafe; it just means that we do not know as much about them as we do about sweeteners that are added to foods by producers.

**How about using fruit or fruit juice in place of sugar in cooking?** It depends on your family's needs. If someone in the family has diabetes, this may not be the best choice. Fruit and fruit juice will raise blood sugar just as much as sugar will raise it. Artificial sweeteners may be a better choice for you.

For families without diabetes, fruit or fruit juice will add good nutrition and give a pleasant taste to foods.

**What else adds sweet taste without sugar?** Try using vanilla extract, cinnamon, allspice, or grated orange zest. Orange zest is the thin, bright, outer skin of oranges. Don't grate the white part; it is bitter tasting. Each of these flavorings helps recipes to taste sweeter without adding extra sugar.

### **Suggestions for Leaders**

Have volunteers prepare Chocolate Lover's Light Brownies and Lightened Cheesecake Torte for the meeting. Show the equipment used to make yogurt cheese and ask the person who made this recipe to describe how it is done. Provide a small taste of each recipe to those attending the meeting.

Nutrition information labels from food packages make good teaching tools. Ask the volunteers who make the brownies and cheesecake to save the packages from reduced-fat margarine, nonfat yogurt, reduced-fat chocolate chips, and part-skim ricotta cheese. Save packages from regular margarine, yogurt made from whole milk, regular chocolate chips, and cream cheese. Compare the information about Total Fat and Saturated Fat on these packages to see how much is saved when the reduced-fat choices are used.

Ask members to bring a recipe for a favorite food that is very high in fat or sugar or both. Discuss how

the recipes might be changed using the suggestions in this lesson. Choose one of the recipes to be made with some of the healthier suggestions in this lesson. Ask a volunteer to make the recipe and bring it to the next meeting.

**Where can I find more recipes for tasty low-fat or low-sugar cooking?** Try one of the cookbooks listed below:

*Eating Well Secrets of Low-Fat Cooking*, by Eating Well Books, Charlotte, Vermont, 1997.

*The New Family Cookbook for People with Diabetes*, American Diabetes Association & American Dietetic Association, New York, 1999.

*American Heart Association Low-Fat, Low-Cholesterol Cookbook*, New York, 1989.

Or check out these Internet help sites:

The American Dietetic Association  
([www.eatright.org](http://www.eatright.org))

The American Diabetes Association  
([www.diabetes.org](http://www.diabetes.org))

The American Heart Association  
([www.americanheart.org](http://www.americanheart.org))

These sites have links to recipes and health professionals in your area. Also check out Internet sites for new cooking products. Package labels often list these sites.

2000: 10M

---

Programs and activities offered by the West Virginia University Extension Service are available to all persons without regard to race, color, sex, disability, religion, age, veteran status, political beliefs, sexual orientation, national origin, and marital or family status. Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Director, Cooperative Extension Service, West Virginia University. West Virginia University is governed by the Board of Trustees of the University System of West Virginia.