

El Pasoans turning to healthful foods

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For John Aguirre, the recipe for a good life is simple: Eat healthy as often as possible and stack up on the fruits and vegetables.

"I never saw salad as a main course," said Aguirre, 35. "I was a hamburger man. I'm lifting weights now, and I get my proteins from potatoes, tuna and salad. After working here, I've become a big salad eater."

Aguirre is the general manager of the Super Salad restaurant on the West Side. He has worked for the chain for 16 years.

"Over the years, I've noticed that more and more people are into eating vegetables," he said. "We even have little children who come into the restaurant and ask for soups and salads, not pizza. Much of this comes from a greater awareness of how important it is to eat healthy. People are getting scared that they will get sick and die early unless they eat right."

March is National Nutrition Month, and organizations including the American Dietetic Association are using the period to emphasize healthful eating. For most people, this means eating more fruits and vegetables and cutting down on fats and sugary foods.

Schools have also gotten in on the act by modifying cafeteria food to reflect today's more-healthful trends and by removing less-healthful snacks from vending machines.

Adele Balesch, food service director for the Canutillo Independent School District, said her staff members worked hard at finding creative ways of making healthful foods appealing to students.

One of the ways was to start at the food preparation end - by hiring salad cooks.

"We have eight new salad cooks, hired from within, and an in-house chef," she said. "We also have a grant that will help us to offer fruits and vegetables all days at Canutillo Elementary School. We must stay within regulations, but we find ways to encourage the kids try out new things."

For example, the school might offer kiwi with a cultural twist.

"The kids like to have chili powder and lime for some of their fruits and vegetables, such as jicama," Balesch said.

The Canutillo school cafeterias take pride in offering attractive salad bars and in experimenting with various fruits and vegetables.

Ines Anchondo, a pediatric nutritionist with a Ph.D. in public health, said it's important to make healthful eating a positive message instead of one that scares people.

"The reasons we should eat healthy are because food provides the nutrients your body needs, this provides energy for the short term and it is good for your long-term health," said Anchondo, who teaches at Texas Tech Health Sciences Center. "It is not a good idea to eat on the run, eat alone or to skip meals. It is healthier to eat together as a family, and it is important to emphasize that eating healthy will help you feel good now."

Anchondo said some experts believe that low-fat school meals may worsen the tendency in some children to overeat.

When children get home from school, they are hungry and ready for another meal, but if a meal was not prepared ahead of time, and they are not supervised, they will eat whatever is in sight, whether it's healthful or not.

"Obesity results from overeating and lack of exercise, but these are behaviors and they do not explain the causes of obesity in children," Anchondo said.

A child's doctor needs to dig deeper to advise parents on how best to improve a youngster's development patterns.

The American Dietetic Association recommends consulting with a registered dietician, especially for people with diabetes, heart disease and high blood pressure, women who are pregnant or plan to get pregnant, teenagers with food problems, people who need to gain or lose weight, those who are caring for seniors in their family and athletes who want to improve performance.

The association in Washington, D.C., also recommends and lobbies for legislation that will result in healthier foods and better eating habits for all

Americans.

Eating healthy was not always in vogue, or at least what the public interpreted to represent health.

For example, one of the fads of 1925 was the cigarette diet, which encouraged people to reach for a Lucky cigarette instead whenever they felt the urge for a sweet.

Other crazy fads have come and gone and all had their followings. The association recommends avoiding diet fads.

Ethel Martinez, a specialist and educator with the El Paso Diabetes Association, said diet is an important plan not only for most diabetics but also for all people in general.

"We recommend balanced meals and exercise," she said. "It's a good idea to have three meals a day and two to three snacks. To maintain healthy levels of the right cholesterol, we recommend fruits and vegetables because they contain fiber. Eating smaller food portions is very important, too."

Souper Salad's John Aguirre said, "Just keep eating healthy. You're rewarding your body when you do so."

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Food Fads

According to the American Dietetic Association, people should avoid food fads. The organization advocates healthy eating and consulting with a dietician for the best advice. Here are some of the fads it has documented:

- 2006. Maple Syrup Diet featured a special syrup-lemon beverage.
- 1994. Dr. Atkins' version high-protein, low-carb plan.
- 1987. Scarsdale Diet emphasized low carb and low-cal plan.
- 1970. Sleeping Beauty diet (participants were sedated).
- 1964. Drinking Man's Diet (Harvard School of Public Health declared it unhealthful).
- 1950. Cabbage Soup Diet (flatulence was a side effect).
- 1934. Bananas and skim milk, promoted by United Fruit Co.
- 1925. Cigarette Diet encouraged reaching for a cigarette instead of sweets.
- 1830. Graham's Diet, resulted in the creation of Graham crackers.
- 1820. Vinegar and Water Diet was promoted by Lord Byron.

Source: American Dietetic Association at www.eatright.org.