

Richmond Review Article – Nutrition Month 2014

By Colin Dring

Well, it's another year, another Nutrition Month! This year's theme focuses on getting Canadians cooking with a focus on food skills and preparation. Simply Cook and Enjoy! Eating right to feel right gets more and more complicated each and every year as another study, report, or fad diet or nutrition advice comes out. The question is often, how do you cut through all this extra information and avoid the worrying that results from too much information and sometimes conflicting information?

Our society has serious food issues ranging from environmental impacts of agriculture to diet-related illness causing unnecessary suffering and increasing health care costs. The nutrition information over the years has become simpler: eat fruits and vegetables, limit intake of sugar, oil, and salt, and eat more whole grains. Michael Pollan, in his book, *In Defence of Food*, reduces it even further: "Eat food, not too much, mostly plants."

While the messaging may be simple, getting food habits and behaviours to shift away from convenient, tasty, pre-packaged foods is extremely difficult when limited by income and, consequently, time. Many of the food skills programs offered in Richmond are tailored towards creating common-sense, easy, and tasty meals while keeping the joy of eating and cooking in mind. Stir it Up, a youth program run by Richmond Food Security, brings young people together to learn how to cook simple, nutritious, tasty meals and simultaneously provides a great space to socialize. Many of our youth go on to work in the food industry.

Cooking skills are just one barrier to eating well. Over 85 per cent of low-income families identify healthy eating as important. However, just about 53 per cent are cooking dinners most weeknights. The cost and time to plan, shop and cook are the biggest impediments to improved nutrition. Many foods that are nutritionally dense, kale, collards, cabbages, are often inexpensive, but require skill and time to bring out the flavours.

In Brazil, health officials have created new guidelines to protect against undernutrition and prevent diet-related diseases. The guidelines work across social classes and make an effort to consider the broader social, cultural, and economic implications of food choices.

The guide's three "Golden Rules" are: (1) Make foods and freshly prepared dishes the basis of your diet, (2) be sure oils, fats, sugar and salt are used in moderation, and (3) limit the intake of ready-to-consume products and avoid those that are ultra-processed.

In addition to these priority guidelines, health officials add the following suggestions:

1. Eat regular meals, paying attention, and in appropriate environments.
2. Eat in company whenever possible.
3. Buy food at places that offer varieties of fresh foods. Avoid those that mainly sell products ready for consumption.
4. Develop, practice, share and enjoy your skills in food preparation and cooking.
5. Plan your time to give meals and eating proper time and space.
6. When you eat out, choose restaurants that serve freshly made dishes and meals. Avoid fast food chains.
7. Be critical of the commercial advertisement of food products.

These guidelines provide a great foundation for folks that are trying to navigate the often overwhelming wealth of information available around the question: What should I eat?!? This Nutrition Month, focus on learning a few easy recipes and share them with your friends or families. Or better, yet, share these guidelines and post them in your kitchen. A few, basic recipes, coupled with cooking skills can make a world of difference in our personal and community nutrition.

“Feed Right to Feel Right” - Richmond Food Security Society works to ensure that all people in the community have access to safe, nutritious, culturally appropriate foods that strengthen our environment and society. To contribute, check out www.richmondfoodsecurity.org and find out how you can get involved.