Enjoy Balanced Lunches

Very few of us enjoy the luxury of a leisurely lunch these days. We’re too busy eating at our desk or doing errands to really enjoy our food. Even if you have a hectic schedule, the benefits of a balanced lunch are worth the time and effort. Eating slowly and listening to internal signals of fullness may help prevent afternoon indigestion and help you maintain healthy weight at the same time! Here are simple tips to help you choose what to eat, what to drink, and how to enjoy your midday meals more.

★ Eat lean with protein in the center of your plate.
Putting lean meat or beans on your plate makes a power lunch in many ways. First, lean choices give you an important midday dose of protein, iron, and B-vitamins for muscle maintenance and repair. Second, lean protein helps with satiety, so you’ll feel fuller and more satisfied for longer after lunch. It doesn’t take a ton of protein to help keep the afternoon munchies away – just 3 to 4 ounces of fish, skinless poultry, or lean red meat.

★ Eat smart with 4 or more colors on your plate.
Color is one of the food cues you can use to get the 40+ nutrients that your body needs. Brightly or deeply colored foods tend to be naturally rich in nutrients – red meats offer iron and zinc, while breads with shades of brown and tan have fiber and B-vitamins. A rainbow of fruits and veggies are a real nutrition bonanza – different colors often indicate different nutrients. Make at least one green and one red/yellow/orange choice for lunch.

★ Drink smart with milk or water in your glass.
If your lunch includes a super-sized soft drink, it’s time to make the smart switch. A single 12-ounce can of regular pop has about 150 empty calories – large drinks can easily have 300+ liquid calories with zero nutritional value. Milk, especially low-fat and fat-free, is a nutrient-rich choice with lots of nutrition for relatively few calories. After an 8-ounce glass (or carton) of milk, switch to ice-cold plain or sparkling water.

★ Start small, slow down, and savor your food.
In a hectic schedule, lunch is often a super-sized fast food, eaten quickly (maybe in the car) with little time to savor the flavors and little attention to our level of fullness. The more satisfying – and healthier – way to enjoy lunch is to start with a smaller portion (maybe half a sandwich, a cup of soup with a side salad, or shared entree). Take at least 20 minutes to eat, paying attention to the meal and your internal cues of satisfaction.

Need tasty tips for adding more fruits and vegetables to lunchtime meals? Help is just a mouse click away at www.fruitsandveggiesmorematters.org/. Sponsored by Produce for Better Health Foundation, this site covers just about everything fruit and vegetable: recipes from professional chefs, tips on best ways to shop for and store your produce, and links to a new site just for kids at www.foodchamps.org/.