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HEALTH WATCH

A well-equipped kitchen for eating more healthfully

By Janet Helm, Special to the Tribune. Helm is a Chicago dietitian and nutrition consultant

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Our diets are woefully low in fruits and vegetables. Fewer than a third of American adults eat the amount the government recommends, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Despite the growing evidence that fruit and vegetable consumption is linked to lower rates of heart disease, cancer, type 2 diabetes and obesity, most of us need to double the amounts we eat.

Part of the problem comes down to preparation. Mothers say they don't know what to do with fruits and vegetables and need ideas on how to fit more into family mealtimes, according to a new survey conducted by the Produce for Better Health Foundation.

"Moms understand the benefits of fruits and vegetables but they need new ways to prepare them," said dietitian Elizabeth Pivonka, president of the non-profit foundation. The foundation has created a new campaign. "Fruits & Veggies -- More Matters," which is designed to close the consumption gap.

Stocking up on pre-cut salad mixes and other convenient forms of fruits and vegetables can help, but so will using your kitchen gadgets and appliances in smart ways to make it easier for you to serve more.

We asked several dietitians for the one kitchen gadget they couldn't live without and the ways they use it to boost their family's fruit and vegetable consumption.

The daily goal is at least 2 1/2 cups of vegetables and 2 cups of fruit for a 2,000-calorie diet. All forms count: fresh, frozen, canned, dried and 100 percent juice.

Keep in mind that the best way to get your kids to eat more fruits and vegetables is for you to do the same.

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Mom's mango smoothie

Liz Weiss and Janice Bissex, co-authors of "The Moms' Guide to Meal Makeovers," created this smoothie recipe featured on mealmakeovermoms.blogspot.com.

Place 2 cups frozen mango (one 10-ounce package), 1 1/2 cups mango juice (or mango juice blend or orange juice) and 1 cup low-fat vanilla yogurt in a blender. Process until smooth. Pour into 4 individual glasses.

For more ideas on how to increase fruits and vegetables in your family's diet, visit fruitsandveggiesmorematters.org.

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The pros report

We asked area dietitian/mothers for their favorite kitchen tools to introduce more vegetables and fruits into their family meals and snacks. Here's what they suggested:

Blender

THE MOM EXPERT

Liz Weiss, co-author of "The Moms' Guide to Meal Makeovers," keeps frozen fruit on hand to whip up smoothies for breakfast or an after-school snack for her two children.

TIPS

*Blend together a cup of 100 percent fruit juice, 1/2 ripe banana, a handful of frozen strawberries (or any other fruit) and 1/2 cup vanilla or fruited low-fat yogurt.

*Make frozen juice pops by combining 100 percent fruit juice and pureed fruit.

Grater

THE MOM EXPERT

It isn't only for cheese, said Elizabeth Ward, a mother of three and author of "The Complete Idiot's Guide to Feeding Your Baby and Toddler." It's also a handy tool for shredding vegetables. She uses a grater to help hide vegetables in family favorites.

TIPS

*Fold grated carrots into lean ground beef or turkey when making meatballs, tacos, meatloaf and burgers.

*Mix grated zucchini or yellow squash into your spaghetti sauce, lasagna, sloppy Joes or chili.

*Bulk up salads, soups and wrap sandwiches with loads of grated carrots.

*Grate a small amount of cheese for topping steamed broccoli or cauliflower.

Sharp knives

THE MOM EXPERT

Prepping produce is less of a chore if you have sharp knives, including a good paring knife, said Chicago dietitian and nutrition consultant Christine Palumbo, a Chicago mother of three.

TIPS

*Dice celery, apples, pears or seedless grapes and add to chicken or tuna salad.

*Chop raw vegetables into bite-size pieces and let your kids dunk them into their favorite dip: low-fat ranch dressing, hummus, peanut butter, salsa or guacamole.

*Add fruit or vegetables to foods your kids already love: peas to mac 'n cheese, diced red pepper or pineapple to pizza, and green beans or asparagus to chicken noodle soup.

*Make grilled vegetable kabobs with mushrooms, tomatoes, zucchini and bell peppers.

Steamer

THE MOM EXPERT

"Everything looks beautiful cooked in a steamer," said Jane Andrews, corporate nutrition manager for Wegmans food markets. Since vegetables never touch the water, you'll retain more of the nutrients compared to boiling or baking.

TIPS

*Cut vegetables the same size so they'll cook evenly. Steam only until tender, which is typically just a few minutes.

*Experiment by adding lemon juice or soy sauce to the water to add flavor.

*Look for the burgeoning varieties of pre-cut veggies (or the products that allow for steam-in-the-bag microwave cooking).

Helm is a Chicago dietitian and nutrition consultant.