Healthy Cooking: Simplified
By Steven McPartland

Cooking a meal every night for yourself or for your whole family to enjoy is a daunting task – and making it a healthy meal can make the difficult seem downright impossible. You’re strapped for time, you don’t want to spend a fortune and you want something that will taste good enough to be worth the effort but that won’t make you gain ten pounds just by looking at it. Against those odds you might even feel like giving up and trying for something more attainable, like turning dust into gold or eating the moon.

But don’t go hungrily eyeing the moon just yet (if it really is made of cheese it probably has a lot of fat anyway). Together these obstacles may make a healthy home-cooked dinner feel like a world away, but no one obstacle by itself is impossible to overcome. Tackle them each on their own, and one by one they’ll fall before you.

Where do we start? Well, first off, how exactly does one go about eating “healthier”? A big part of healthy eating is a varied diet, and that may mean trying new foods. More important still, it may involve trying old foods – maybe foods you tried and didn’t like – in new ways that make them more appealing. Start with these tips:

- Buy a recipe book, or find a good website with recipes. Especially look for sources of healthy recipes: even if you’re not diabetic, a diabetic cook book may be a great source of recipes designed for people trying to eat healthier.
- Look for ways to incorporate more beans, vegetables, fruits and whole grains into your diet. Try to find recipes that have these ingredients. For example, many chili recipes include beans and vegetables and are readily prepared in a crockpot.
- Look for recipes that use little or no meat. Meat can be healthy, but eating less of it may encourage you to eat more plant foods, and may even save you some money in the process.
- Don’t be afraid to retry a food you’ve had bad history with. Maybe you never cared for raw broccoli florets, but you may find that stir-fried in the right sauce broccoli becomes a new favorite vegetable.
Now, new recipes are all well and good, but what about your old favorites? Well, there’s no need to give them up completely! But take a look at your old recipes, and look for ways you could make them healthier. For example:

- When recipes call for oil, try using a healthy oil like canola, peanut or olive oil. These oils are higher in healthier “unsaturated” fats, and lower in saturated and trans fats, which can have some nasty effects on your cholesterol.

- Try using ground turkey or chicken in place of ground beef: it’s lower in fat - including saturated fat – and can have almost 100 fewer calories per serving. It will probably impart a new flavor onto the recipe, but give it a try: you might like the new taste.

- Try whole-wheat pasta. You may find little if any difference compared to the processed stuff, but it has three times the fiber.

- In recipes that call for white flour, replace half of the flour with whole wheat flour: this will increase the fiber of the recipe without compromising the texture and quality.

- While you shouldn’t load up on artificial sweeteners, they can be an effective way to cut calories out of sweet recipes. Try replacing just half the sugar in recipes with a substitute. This will cut calories without adding so much artificial sweetener to your diet to be of concern – most artificial sweeteners have been shown to be harmless in any reasonable dosage. Just make sure you use a sweetener suited to the task (e.g. use one designed for baking if that’s what you need it for).

All this may be starting to sound like a lot of work, but don’t give up yet. Simple inconvenience can be a surprising obstacle to eating healthy, but don’t let a busy schedule or fatigue it stop you. Try these ideas to cut some time and effort out of cooking:

- Remember that crockpot I mentioned earlier? It really is your friend! These nifty little contraptions can make cooking a whole meal incredibly easy. Many recipes simply require that you put the ingredients into the crockpot, set the timer, and eat when the time is up. Recipes are easy to find in books and online and often find ways to incorporate veggies into a tasty dish.

- Crockpot or not, try cooking meals that combine all the ingredients into one pot, pan or dish. By mixing foods you like with foods you’re less fond of or completely unsure
of, you’ll vary your palette all while saving you time and hassle before, during and even after cooking (no one likes having five pots to clean after dinner).

- If you can, buy pre-washed, pre-cut vegetables – they’ll save you the trouble of having to cut, peel or de-seed on your own time.
- In many cases, frozen vegetables can be more convenient to store and use than their fresher counterparts, and they’re about as healthy. Consider them if you think they’d be more convenient.
- If the main course is a bit time-intensive, make a quick and simple side-dish, like a salad.

What about cost? All this sounds good on paper, but if it costs too much it may be out of the question. Well, ultimately there’s no one answer to how much healthy eating will or should cost you, and a lot will depend on your available funds. But consider these guidelines:

- Give yourself a reasonable food budget. There’s no reason why food should cost you a fortune, but consider healthy eating a worthwhile investment.
- A crockpot is a reasonably-priced one-time expense, and it could prove invaluable to your future cooking efforts.
- At the market, look over the produce section for some healthy ingredients with an eye for which ones are the cheapest, or offer the best bang for the buck. Then look up recipes that specifically use those ingredients and get cooking!
- If on any given week you see a sale on certain ingredients, such as potatoes or turkey, look up recipes that use those ingredients and give them a try, or make an old favorite recipe that uses those ingredients.

Cooking can be a lot of fun, and knowing that you’re cooking something healthy can be a great feeling. Don’t let it intimidate you! See how many of these tips you can incorporate into your eating schedule, and you may find you actually enjoy making meals.
Sources
