Nutrition Basics for Chefs

Kids don't need a lot of complex, scientific information about food. They eat certain foods because they like them, and having the opportunity to taste foods (especially with friends and supportive adults) helps them learn to like a variety of healthy foods. In keeping with the way kids learn about food, the nutrition messages in this guide are deliberately simple and easy for kids to understand. Chefs may wish to review the basics of these messages prior to engaging kids in the activities in order to feel confident answering questions or reinforcing messages in a variety of ways. For chefs who want to know more, we recommend checking out the resources and information available at www.choosemyplate.gov.

Message 1: Eat from every food group, every day.

The five food groups outlined in MyPlate (page 42) are Grains, Fruits, Vegetables, Protein, and Dairy. Kids will likely know the basics of the food groups already. It's not necessary to go into detail about each group. Instead, have kids think about how they can eat foods from all five food groups every day. Remind them that all food groups provide important nutrients that help them grow strong and give them the energy they need to live active, healthy lives. No single food group can provide everything they need to be healthy, so it's important to eat from all five food groups. Reinforce this message by having kids name the food groups of each food used in a recipe or activity. Ask them what other food groups they would need to eat from today in order to eat from all five.

Message 2: Eat a variety of colorful fruits and vegetables.

Fruits and vegetables of similar colors have similar vitamins and nutrients that provide important functions in our body. For instance, yellow and orange fruits and vegetables contain nutrients that provide us with a healthy heart, good vision, and strength to fight off colds. As with food groups, remind kids that no single color fruit or vegetable can provide us with everything we need to be healthy. We need to eat from different color groups each day. It's not necessary for kids to know the specific vitamins and nutrients in each color group. Instead, focus on the simple message of choosing a variety of colorful fruits and vegetables. Reinforce the message by having kids call out each color of the produce used in the activities. Divide them into teams and have them brainstorm as many fruits and vegetables as they can for a particular color (e.g., red, yellow/orange, white, blue/purple, green). Emphasize the visual appeal of "making your plate a rainbow" and filling at least half your plate with colorful fruits and vegetables.

Nutrition Facts
Serving Size 1 1/2 cups (346g)
Servings per Package 4
Amount Per Serving
Calories 170 Calories from Fat 100
% Daily Value*
Total Fat 11g **17**%
Saturated Fat 1g **5**%
Trans Fat 0g
Cholesterol 0mg **0**%
Sodium 170mg **7**%
Total Carbohydrate 17g **6**%
Dietary Fiber 6g **24**%
Sugars 9g
Protein 4g
Vitamin A 20% • Vitamin C 60%
Calcium 6% • Iron 10%
*Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet. Your daily values may be higher or lower depending on your calorie needs.

Message 3: Choose whole grains as often as you can.

Whole grains are called "whole" because they contain the entire kernel of grain. Refined grains are called "refined" because during processing, parts of the grain kernel are removed. The parts that are removed contain important vitamins and nutrients. "Enriched" grains add back in only some of the vitamins and nutrients; they do not contain the entire grain kernel and are not whole grains. When working with kids, use simple analogies that will help kids understand the importance of choosing whole grains. For instance, kids typically like the analogy that whole grains are like a broom that sweeps through their body and removes the "bad stuff," just like a broom removes dirt from a house. When working with older kids, it's appropriate to teach them how to identify whole grain foods. The trick is simple — have them look at the first ingredient in the ingredients list. If the first ingredient is a whole grain (like whole wheat flour, whole grain oats, brown rice, or bulgur), then the food is a whole grain. Most importantly, let kids taste how delicious whole grains can be! Some kids will have very little experience with whole grains — you can open up a whole new world of tastes by letting them explore these foods.

Message 4: Compare food labels to make healthier choices.

Food labels may seem complicated, but simple messages about comparing labels are fairly easy for kids to understand. Show kids a sample label from an actual food package, or use the sample label on page 40. Start by focusing on the number of servings in the package. Kids often do not realize that a single package or bottle (for instance a 20-ounce soda) can actually contain multiple servings. Engage kids by showing them the amount in one serving (for instance, by pouring out 8 ounces of the soda into a glass) and the amount in the entire package and asking them how much they would typically eat or drink. If there are two servings within the package and kids say they would eat it all, then everything on the label must be multiplied by 2 to give you the nutrition facts for the amount they would eat.

Next, explain that kids can compare labels for different foods and beverages to find out which one has lower amounts of less desirable nutrients (such as sugar, sodium, and saturated fat). When working with younger kids, it's usually best to focus on a single nutrient, such as sugar for beverages. Have them compare the amounts of that nutrient across multiple packages, keeping in mind the number of servings per package. Ask them to choose the one with the lower number. With older or more mature groups, ask them to evaluate the foods across several different nutrients.

Wrap up discussions about labels by reminding kids that many healthy foods, like fruits and vegetables, do not even have labels. Encourage them to make their own foods and drinks when they can and to include plenty of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.