Comfort Food

The temperature is changing and the days are getting shorter – ‘Tis the season for comfort food. I don’t know about you, but I tend to eat more during the cooler months. The foods I am drawn towards are casseroles, thick stews and baked goodies. This time of the year it can also be a challenge to keep up with the exercise routine you were so dedicated to in the spring and summer. How do we balance this conundrum? This Health and Wellness issue will cover eating and comfort foods. My tip is to make smart carbohydrate (carbs) choices. For me, carbs are on a continuum from “better” (i.e. higher fiber, more nourishing, health-promoting) to “worse” (i.e. lower fiber, less nourishing, health-harming). When choosing a carbohydrate, I ask myself these two questions; “how can I move along the “carb continuum” towards better quality carbohydrate choices, and how can I add value to my body based on my choices?”

“Smart Carbs”

First of all, what are “smart carbs”? According to the Harvard School of Public Health, “smart carbs” are carbs that are health-promoting, slow-digesting, and nutrient-rich. I will classify “smart carbs” into two categories: high-fiber and starchy.

High-fiber carbohydrates are most vegetables, most fruits, and legumes (beans, lentils, etc.). Because of their high fiber content, all of these carbs digest slowly which keep you feeling full, energized for hours and they prevent cravings. They are also rich in vitamins, minerals, and phytonutrients.

Starchy carbs include sweet/starchy fruits, starchy tubers, whole grain rice, oats and other whole grains, and any whole grain flour products. These foods are generally higher in fiber and nutrients, and digest relatively slowly. Many of these even contain a few grams of protein!

Not so smart carbs are any refined sugary products which include pastries, cookies and bars (even those sneaky protein and nutrition bars), sweets such as candies, sweet drinks, dried fruits and anything that is processed, comes frozen and/or in a box. Refined carbohydrates have almost no fiber or beneficial nutrients. Unlike the “smart carbs”, these subtract value from our bodies. Refined carbs digest and absorb quickly, which leads to a blood sugar rush and crash, insulin spikes, and potential rebound overeating. More often than not, these carbs leave you feeling kind of yucky.

Keep It Simple

SMART: More fiber and nutrients + whole foods = more value
NOT SO SMART: Less fiber and fewer nutrients + processing = less value
Keep It Simple Continued...
Always look to add more value to your diet. Do this by moving along the carb continuum towards healthier options. A good way to move along the continuum is to build a carbohydrate pyramid from a solid foundation of nourishing whole food carbohydrates (starchy and non-starchy). And if you are ever in doubt, ask yourself: Do these carbs add value to my body? If the answer is “yes”, then that is a smart carb choice.

Eat refined sugary carbs only rarely. Leave them for very special occasions, like a birthday, a wedding or dessert after a fancy meal. Remember to eat them slowly and enjoy them. Even though we know these foods do not nourish us or help us get healthier or leaner, if it is a special occasion, enjoy the moment and move on.

Examples of “Smart Carbs”
Have fun and eat like a professional athlete. Enjoy experimenting and learning about new foods. Here is a list of smart carbs you can try:

Higher Fiber
- Lentils
- Green peas
- Black beans
- Kidney beans
- Garbanzo beans
- Navy beans
- Black-eye peas or cowpeas
- Lima or fava beans
- Winter squash (acorn, kabocha, butternut, carnival, sugar pumpkin, sweet dumpling, spaghetti, blue hubbard, delicata)

Add beans to a salad, or refry them and top them on a chicken breast or lean beef with some salsa. You can also spice them up with fresh herbs, balsamic vinegar and a little garlic powder, or some hot sauce. Lentils can be added to a vegetable soup. Winter squash can be cut in half, seeded and roasted. You can mash cooked squash and make it savory or puree it, add cinnamon and a touch of maple syrup or honey. Baked squash fries are another way to prepare these awesome smart carbs.

Starchy whole foods
- Sweet potatoes
- Grains (quinoa, amaranth, buckwheat groats and teff)
- Steel-cut oats

Sweet potatoes come in different colors. The orange and purple once are very high in beneficial phytochemicals and vitamins. It is always best to eat the rainbow. One handful of sweet potatoes contain one-third of your daily requirement for vitamin C and 385% for vitamin A. They are also high in vitamin B6, potassium and manganese. You can do all the things with sweet potatoes that you would do with regular potatoes like roasting, pureeing, mashing, baking, etc.
Examples of “Smart Carbs” Continued

The three grains mentioned are packed full of fiber, nutrients, and distinctive taste. They can be prepared into side dishes, prepare them up like porridge, or even ground into flour for things like pancakes and muffins.

Steel-cut oats are not processed as much as rolled oats. They are just chopped up a bit leaving most of the whole grain where the fiber and nutrients are kept. Steel-cut oats take a little longer to cook, but you are worth the extra time!

Conclusion

Nourish your body with smart carb choices and move along the “carb continuum”. Think about how to make your choices each day just a little bit more nourishing. Could you grab some fruit instead of a candy bar? Could you choose sweet potatoes instead of regular potatoes? Small steps are the path to change. Keep it simple and make choices that work for you.....one day and meal at a time. (Article inspired by Precision Nutrition Lean Eating Program)

Quinoa Quiche Muffins

(Recipe inspired by Gourmet Nutrition – Precision Nutrition)

Quinoa is high in fiber, rich in vitamins and minerals and for a grain, it is high in protein. This snack/meal will pack a protein punch anytime during the day.

**Ingredients**

- ½ cup quinoa
- 1 cup vegetable broth or water
- 2 tbsp olive oil
- 1 onion, thinly sliced
- 4 cups fresh spinach leaves or chopped kale
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 1 cup crumbled feta cheese
- ¼ cup flat leaf parsley
- 2 large eggs, lightly beaten
- 1 cup egg whites

Bring veggie broth or water to a boil in a medium-sized pot and then add the quinoa. Cover and reduce heat to low. Simmer for 15 minutes. Preheat oven to 375. Spray a muffin tin with cooking spray and set aside. Heat olive oil over medium heat and add onions. Cook to 3 to 4 minutes. Stir in spinach or kale leaves and garlic, approx. 2 minutes. Season with salt and pepper. Remove from heat and let cool. In a large bowl, combine the cooled cooked quinoa, cooled spinach or kale mixture, cheese and parsley. Pour into the beaten eggs and egg whites. Mix until well combined. Divide batter evenly among prepared muffin cups. Bake for 30 to 40 minutes or until the tops are golden brown and pulling away from the muffin tin. Remove from oven and cool on rack.

Makes approximately 8 to 10 small muffins.