

EATING WHEN STUCK AT HOME: THE WHAT-WHERE-WHY

Generally speaking, your nutritional needs aren't different than they were before the spread of the coronavirus, but limited choices at grocery stores and social distancing measures have likely changed the what, the where, and the why of your eating regimen. Perhaps scarcity of choices at the meat counter has forced you to consider a vegetarian option, like Beyond Meat or Soyrito. Maybe you've finally gotten around to skimming the user manual for your Instant Pot since you are no longer gathering at the local burger joint with friends. Have you been using your grandma's casserole recipes? Maybe you have been - not only because you have the time, but because you find comfort in eating these yummy foods from your childhood. Let's take a closer look at some nutritional considerations as we all figure out how to nourish ourselves during these strange times.

The "WHAT":

There isn't one specific food or nutrient that will magically prevent covid-19, but an overall, healthful, balanced diet plays an important role in preventing you from getting sick and helping you recover quickly if you do. Good nutrition is essential for a strong immune system. Some nutrients that stand out for their immune-boosting potential include: protein, beta-carotene, zinc, selenium and vitamins B6, C, D, and E. Rather than concern yourself about the best food source of each of these nutrients, focus on doing your best to eat (at a least a little bit) from each food group each day (*some* whole grains, *some* fruits/vegetables, *some* meat/beans and *some* dairy/dairy alternatives) each day. Doing so, you'll be sure to obtain these important nutrients. Remember also, that you're better off getting these nutrients from food, rather than supplements, because research tells us these nutrients consumed individually from supplements don't convey the same benefits as when these nutrients are consumed from whole foods in the context of a healthy overall diet. There are components in real/whole foods that help your body absorb nutrients more efficiently, not to mention the fact that there are many other antioxidants and immune-bolstering chemicals in foods that are still unidentified. On the other hand, a standard multi-vitamin supplement can help you meet your nutrient needs, but this pill can never replace the effects of a balanced diet rich in fruits and vegetables. Choose a multivitamin specific to your age/gender with around 100%DV of vitamins/minerals. Remember high doses don't equal super immunization!

Gain Confidence in Your Cooking Skills with Online Help: Staying home with limited ingredients has forced many of us to try to figure out how to prepare meals for ourselves. Lucky for us, the internet is available to help.

Chef Amanda Freitag's Facebook page and Instagram have great how-to videos for basic cooking techniques. She uses the hashtag #easyAF.

YouTube channels: Everyday Food, Serious Eats, Spruce Eats provide practical "how to" videos to get you going

Websites: Epicurious.com and allrecipes.com provide common basic recipes

Making Something Out of Nothing: With limited choices and the availability of our favorite foods changing from day to day and store to store, it's time to get creative! Here are a few "something out of nothing" ideas to get you started pilfering your pantry and grabbing what you can from HEB to put together some easy, immune-boosting meals.

Quick Fruit Crisp: Heat up a single serving of fruit or berries until warm. Sprinkle with granola. Take it up a notch by topping it with some vanilla yogurt, frozen yogurt, or whipped cream. Thawed frozen fruits work too. Stock up on frozen fruits or fruit mixes (like HEB Blendables smoothie starters) when available.

Protein-Grain/"Fried Rice" Mix up: Top ½ - ¾ c cooked instant brown rice/quinoa mix (or basmati rice or farro) with 2 soft-boiled eggs. Mix in a few dashes of soy sauce and Sriracha. Add in any leftover veggies you have on hand – wilted spinach, steamed broccoli, roasted carrots, defrosted mixed veggies (like carrots/peas).

Easy Bean Salad: Rinse a can of beans (black, garbanzo, pinto – your fave) and place beans in bowl. Add chopped tomatoes, cucumbers, parsley, green onions, lemon juice, salt, and olive oil.

Leftover Bowl: Rice, beans, leftover chicken/pork/beef, spicy salsa, tomatoes/veggies – mix it all together and enjoy.

Veggie Burrito: Roll up leftover grilled vegetables, canned tomatoes, canned beans, and shredded cheese in a tortilla or on a tostada; season with cumin and garlic powder.

Quick Crustless Quiche: Heat up frozen spinach and bell peppers (or other veggies you have on hand – mushrooms, etc) in a small amount of oil in a skillet. In a bowl, whisk together 6 eggs and enough chicken broth to thin out the egg. Add veggie mixture to eggs, mix well, and pour into small baking dish or pie pan. Bake at 400 degrees for about 15 minutes. For a meatier version, add some chicken apple sausage, if available. And top with chopped tomatoes and shredded cheese, if desired.

Green Madness Tuna: To a blender, add plain Greek yogurt, a pinch of salt, and green veggies and herbs of choice like spinach, cilantro, avocado, green onion, basil, kale, or jalapeno. Blend to make a green sauce. Mix sauce with a can of drained tuna and eat on tostada or inside an English muffin. Don't like tuna? Use shredded cooked chicken, turkey, or pork instead.

Buy and Freeze: Although availability seems to change from day to day and store to store, the frozen veggie section at my HEB has been empty for the last few days; however, FRESH fruits and veggies are abundant. Afraid you won't use all that you buy and it will all go to waste? Chop those fruits/veggies and store them in the freezer.

Buy an extra bunch of bananas, slice them, and seal them in a Ziploc bag – each slice tastes like banana ice cream and adding these slices to smoothies helps create a more "creamy" (rather than "icy") texture.

Frozen grapes make a refreshing snack – especially after you're all sweaty from your in-home workouts.

Add sliced onions and bell peppers to a Ziploc bag, label it "fajita veggies" and freeze them so that you've got veggies ready to go, when you want to defrost a package of pre-marinated or pre-cooked fajita meat
<https://www.heb.com/product-detail/h-e-b-select-ingredients-fully-cooked-beef-fajitas/125208>
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Coarsely chop potatoes, celery, carrots, onions, zucchini, and bell peppers (or whatever vegetables you like in your stew). Add 4 cups of these veggies to a large pot and add 1-2 packages of HEB's lean stew beef and a package of HEB's pot roast sauce – simmer on low until beef is fork tender. While you're chopping – chop 4 MORE cups of your stew veggies and add them to a Ziploc freezer bag and label it "stew veggies". Freeze another package or 2 of lean beef stew meat. Defrost it all in the refrigerator when you're ready for another batch of easy beef stew. <https://www.heb.com/product-detail/h-e-b-beef-stew-meat-extra-lean/371458> <https://www.heb.com/product-detail/h-e-b-select-ingredients-pot-roast-cooking-sauce/1902067>

Watch the Calories: Keep in mind, that while our needs for vitamins and minerals are the same, our CALORIE needs may be decreased. With gyms closed and less "coming and going" from work, shopping, and daily activities, we may be burning fewer calories than we normally do. Portion-control and paying attention to hunger/fullness cues are extra-important during these times.

Choosing Filling Foods: Finishing a meal with full, satisfied feeling can prevent overeating later. Protein, fiber, and healthy fats come to mind here. For protein, think "loin" or "round" cuts of beef and pork, white meat poultry and reduced fat dairy. For fiber, include whole grains (corn tortillas, brown rice, whole wheat bread, pasta, crackers), fruits, vegetables, beans, nuts and seeds. And for healthy fats, make sure to

include foods like avocado, nuts and seeds cook with oils like canola and olive. If you feel full and satisfied after eating, it'll be easier to avoid the temptation of chips or other junk foods you may have around the house.

Use Single-serve Containers: Take advantage of the extra time you have by pre-portioning your snacks into individual containers or baggies instead of eating from the bag/box/package. This practice allows you to keep track of how much you're eating and can prevent you from eating more than you need.

The “WHERE”:

Now, more than ever, we are eating our meals and snacks in our homes – whether home-cooked or takeout restaurant foods. While it's tempting to spend the day in front of your favorite Netflix series with a huge bowl of queso and chips on the coffee table right in front of you, this practice isn't necessarily the best for your health (or waistline). And working from home or attending school online can make it easy to snack all day long. To prevent OVER-snacking, make it a point to only eat in designated areas – like the kitchen table. Deciding to eat (only) at the kitchen table can help you to focus on eating when you're truly hungry and stopping when you're satisfied. Eating while watching TV or working can lead to mindlessly consuming more calories than you need. Planned snack breaks/meals eaten together in the kitchen or dining area as a family (or group of roommates) can add to the social enjoyment of meals/snack-times and can promote psychological well-being while preventing overeating at the same time.

The “WHY”:

There's no denying the fact that these are uncertain, unsettling times...nor can we deny the comforting effect of food. Foods high in salt, sugar, and/or fat can provide a temporary sense of wellbeing by stimulating the brain's reward system. Many of us may be more likely to crave things like chocolate, baked goods, French fries, chips, ice cream (I could go on and on...) as we experience apprehension about what the future holds, feelings of isolation, or boredom with more time on our hands. It's certainly okay to indulge these cravings to some extent – especially now, since most of us have more time to bake and/or make things from scratch. A good strategy here to is make sure your “treat” is something that's REALLY WORTH the calories – something that's extra-tasty and/or extra-satisfying. Eat it slowly. Close your eyes. Take small bites and chew thoroughly. You may find that chewing a bite 20-40 times will fully release the “essence” of the food. Allow yourself to genuinely enjoy each “indulgence”, rather than mindlessly scarfing down average-tasting junk foods in front of the TV or computer. If you have leftovers, package them in pre-portioned packaging (as mentioned above) or freeze for later, so you are less-tempted to over-indulge.

While food can temporarily provide a feeling of comfort (or distract you from boredom or feelings of isolation), other behaviors can have a similar effect. Consider making a list of things you can do to turn your attention away from food when you're tempted to over-indulge in less-healthy choices. Ideas to get you started include: calling a friend, taking a bath or shower, checking email/social media, brushing your pet, reading a magazine, cleaning/dusting, saying a prayer, meditating, taking a nap, playing a game of solitaire, writing a letter, going outside for some fresh air, drinking a bottle of water, exercise, etc.

BOTTOM LINE: What we are experiencing is unprecedented. Good nutrition is as important now as it was before the threat of covid-19 started. Social distancing and local mandates have forced many of us the change our eating and exercise practices. Frequent handwashing, adequate rest, regular physical activity, and finding ways to reduce stress are important in keeping well and preventing the spread of infection, but what you eat can make a difference as well. Be patient with yourself. Understand that it may take time to

adapt your eating plan to these new circumstances. Moving forward, using tips from above and some trial and error, it is possible to eat well (and healthfully) as we all seek ways to nurture our physical and mental well-being.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

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