

PENNY SAVER NEWS

FAX: 932-5261

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BY: Mary A. Keith, Ph.D., L.D.
Food, Nutrition and Health Agent**HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY**

5339 S. County Road 579

Seffner, FL 33584-3334

PH:(813)744-5519 x 136, FAX:744-5776
e-mail:mkeith@ufl.edu**Convenient, and Nutritious?**

There are not many people around these days who only cook from scratch. If you are one of them, you are a rare bird! For the rest of us, whether good or bad, convenience foods are part of our way of life. Is there a problem with convenient food? It's quick, easy, not messy, no waste - what's not to like about all of that?

Unfortunately, a lot of convenience foods are not very nutritious. Most have a lot of extra salt, sugar and/or fat. Those add up to extra pounds, extra blood pressure and maybe extra blood sugar. A lot of convenience foods are highly processed. That means we aren't getting the fiber, vitamins, minerals or other minor nutrients we need. But given the time crunch most of us live in, how can we use convenience foods and still eat a nutritious meal?

A first step to balancing time and health with convenience foods is to choose which convenience foods you use very carefully. For example, the pre-washed, pre-cut vegetables and fruits and the ready-to-eat salad mixes are convenience foods. So are canned and frozen vegetables and fruits. If you don't have time to wash and chop and peel, use them. But choose the frozen products with no added salt or sugar, no sauces, gravies or syrups. Choose canned vegetables with no added salt. Pick fruit canned in juice or light syrup.

Check the label to decide. Look at the Nutrition Facts panel for sodium and sugar content. Lower is better for both. Then read the ingredient list. The further down the list you have to read to find sugars, syrups or other sweeteners, the better it is.

Other convenience foods can be improved by adding healthy ingredients. If your family likes the seasoned pasta, rice or potato dishes-from-a-box products, dilute the salt or fat. Do the same with instant noodle packages and the bags of frozen dinner mixes. Prepare the dish, but add plenty of vegetables and some lean protein. Stretch the meal from 2.5 servings (Who eats half a serving anyway?!) to 4, 5 or more servings. Add a package of frozen mixed vegetables and either leftover lean meat from a previous meal or a can of chicken or tuna to a package of seasoned rice. If the frozen dinner mix has sausage and pasta add more turkey sausage and whatever vegetable blends well. Serve with a bag of mixed salad, ready-to-eat, and your favorite dressing. Adding the extra meat and vegetables takes no more time to prepare than the purchased, high fat and high salt package alone.

For pizza lovers, buy plain cheese pizzas. Then add your own mixture of plenty of vegetables and a little lean meat. Some pizza combos include fruit too. How about Canadian bacon (very low fat) and a can of drained pineapple chunks?

Other convenience foods can be improved by leaving out some things. When you prepare those instant noodles, cut the seasoning packet in half and only add half. One packet often contains more than a whole day's allowance of salt! So add the veggies and meat for more flavor, omit half the seasoning for less salt, you're on your way!

Other substitutions can be as simple as using skim or 1% milk instead of whole or 2% milk to prepare a cake or muffin mix. If the directions call for added margarine or butter, use half the amount. Substitute plain fat free yogurt for half or all of the mayonnaise with a dip mix. For a thicker dip use Greek style yogurt. Many cake,

cupcake and brownie mixes taste just wonderful if you use applesauce instead of the oil the package calls for. More nutrition, less fat, it's a low-guilt dessert!

Here's a quick, easy and cool dinner. Prepare the cucumber dressing in advance if dinner has to be on the table super-fast. Look for low fat salad dressing. You can use lettuce leaves or a small handful of pre-washed salad greens in each pita.

Greek Salad Pitas

2 fresh, ripe tomatoes, thinly sliced	1 medium cucumber
¼ cup Greek or Italian vinaigrette salad dressing	¼ cup chopped black olives
1/3 cup pre-chopped green pepper	4 small pita rounds
8 oz hummus	4 large leaves lettuce
3 oz (2/3 cup) crumbled feta cheese	

Peel and dice cucumber. Cut lettuce leaves in half. Combine salad dressing, cucumber, olives and pepper. Cut pita breads in half and open gently. Spread equal amounts of hummus in each one. Divide lettuce, tomato slices, cucumber mixture and cheese among pita pockets. Serve immediately. Serves 4.