

**PENNY SAVER NEWS**

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Well yes, crunches could be good for your abs, but most of us won't or can't do those exercises. What would be better for the size and shape of many abdomens is to skip the crunchy foods - the chips and corn puffs, the cans of peanuts, and ooh the crispy skin on fried chicken. But we love the foods that crunch and crackle in our mouths! Unfortunately, many foods get their crunch by being fried in lots of fat, often after being rolled in flour, cornmeal or some other breading. The breading adds flavor but it also absorbs more fat. And all that fat ends up wrapped around our abdomens.

Thankfully there are ways to get the crunch without the grease. How about some crunchy veggies? Crunch on carrot or celery sticks if you're not adventurous. Just use a low fat dip! Add crisp apple or pear slices to salad or sandwiches. You might be surprised how good apple slices are in tuna salad sandwiches. Crisp pears are wonderful with ham and mild cheese.

The traditional way to add some crunch to Oriental foods has long been water chestnuts. You can get cans of ready-sliced chestnuts in just about any grocery store. Add them to salads or stir-fries instead of croutons, and cut the calories. Ready for something a little less common? Try jicama. It looks like a turnip with a thin brown skin. Peel off the skin and slice or sliver the crisp white interior. With practically no taste of its own it blends well with salads, and it's a good substitute for water chestnuts in stir-fried foods. If you want to taste before you buy, jicama is on the buffet line at local salad-bar

restaurants. It's the bowl of bright white slivers. Try a few on your next salad, then head for the grocery store. If you have to ask for it, it's pronounced HEE-ca-ma.

But you say, "What about fried chicken? I love my fried chicken and fish, crunch on the outside, juicy on the inside. Adding an apple won't make chicken crisp. And please, don't tell me to roll them in cornflakes! They get soggy and gummy." I've heard those complaints. But we can still make some downright good tasting chicken without frying it. There are a couple of tricks to pay attention to.

Traditional breading uses flour to dry the surface. Then egg or milk is the 'glue' to hold cornmeal or more flour. Two layers of starch absorb more fat. One trick is to try the Japanese bread crumbs called panko. They are super crispy and crunchy themselves. They're very fine so it's easier to get an even coat on your fish or chicken. Panko crumbs are also very bland. That means you can add as much flavor as you want without the crumbs affecting it. Add some Cajun seasoning to the 'fried' tomatoes. Add Italian or Mexican herbs to the chicken or the fish. Suit your taste.

Another trick is to be sure your oven is hot enough. A 375 - 400°F oven dries the outer layer of crumbs quickly, before it has a chance to get soggy. And it cooks the chicken, fish or veggies inside quickly enough to seal the juices inside. That helps keep the insides moist and the outside crisp.

Finally, use a spray bottle to spritz the food with just a very light coating of oil, or use cooking spray. Oil does make starches crisp. The problem is that we get too much oil. Less oil means fewer calories. It also means easier cleanup and no gummy edges to the pan.

If you're ready to go for the crunch today, here's a crunchy fish recipe with a

Mexican edge to the seasoning. Replace the chili and cumin with basil and marjoram for an Italian meal. If fish is not your thing, you can use the same recipe for chicken tenders too. Or, for a finger-food treat for the kids, use the same basic method on strips of summer squash and zucchini. They'll only take 15 minutes at 400°F until they're crisp and ready to dip in pizza sauce.

### Crunchy Mexi-Fish

1/3 cup low fat buttermilk

1 tsp chili powder

½ tsp dried oregano flakes

¼ tsp ground cumin

1 cup panko bread crumbs

1 ½ lbs thick white fish, cut into strips

Salt, pepper to taste if desired

dash of hot pepper sauce if desired

Preheat oven to 375°F. Line baking sheet with parchment paper or foil. Combine buttermilk and spices in shallow pan or bowl. Put bread crumbs on a plate. Dip fish sticks into seasoned buttermilk, then roll in crumbs. Arrange on baking sheet so the pieces do not touch. Spray lightly with cooking spray. Bake fish about 10 minutes if pieces are 1 inch thick, longer if thicker. Turn over once during cooking. (For chicken heat oven to 400°F. Bake drumsticks 40 to 50 minutes). Serves 4-5.