SHARING MEALS TOGETHER: A GUIDE TO SMARTER POTLUCKS

The Healthy Choice, The Easy Choice
Potlucks may be smarter for many reasons: everyone shares in the cost, everyone shares in the food preparation time, and everyone shares in the time together at the table. People with health issues may have problems identifying dishes at a potluck that meet their health needs. This handout does not contain a list of foods to REMOVE from a potluck. Instead, here is a list of tools and techniques to help make the healthy choice the easy choice, guiding everyone to navigate potlucks in a smarter way.

Overall Goals:

- To encourage provision of healthier foods at communal meals.
- To implement strategies to encourage healthy food selection at communal meals.
- To encourage consumption of healthy foods at communal meals.

A Potluck by Any Other Name.....

- Covered Dish Supper
- Carry-In Dinner
- Shared Meal
- Fellowship Meal

No matter what the name, all are communal meals!
**MANAGE PORTION SIZES**

Keep portion sizes appropriate by using pre-portioned snacks (foods) and strategically chosen serving containers and utensils. Use larger serving utensils for healthier food options and smaller serving utensils for less healthy options. If guests customarily choose more than one dessert, pre-cut desserts into smaller size portions. Use smaller plates like 9 inch luncheon plates instead of 10 inch dinner plates or platters, and 10 – 12 ounce cups instead of 16 – 20 ounce cups to manage portion sizes and reduce waste. (MyPlate.gov, Let's Talk Trash)

**INCREASE CONVENIENCE OF HEALTHY FOODS**

Make healthy foods more convenient than less healthy options. Place healthier options such as undressed salads and raw vegetables first in line at the food table. Place water and unsweetened drinks first in line at the beverage station. Offer single servings of raw vegetables in small cups ready to grab and go. Provide separate bowls for salad in the buffet line.

**IMPROVE VISIBILITY OF HEALTHY FOODS**

Foods that are easy to see are the first to be selected and eaten, according to research conducted by the Smarter Lunchrooms Movement team. So, make healthy foods the stars of the potluck: front, center, colorful, exciting, and impossible to ignore! A red tablecloth could be used at the front of the line for foods that are heart healthy. Use a cake stand or other object to raise healthier options closer to eye level.

**ENHANCE TASTE EXPECTATIONS**

Foods that look delicious and sound delicious are more likely to taste delicious. Showcase raw fruits and vegetables by arranging bite sized pieces in individual cups with an assortment of colors. Try fruit kabobs on coffee stir sticks. Use colorful serving bowls or colorful placemats underneath healthier options.

**UTILIZE SUGGESTIVE STRATEGIES**

Use signage and train staff (volunteers) to promote healthy target foods with positive prompts. Pair a healthy food item with some of the group's favorites, such as serving raw vegetables with dips on the side, placing fresh fruit on the dessert table, or serving ice cold milk right next to the desserts. Use signs or color-coding to identify foods that are lower in sodium or meet other special food needs.
Special Food Needs

It is difficult to prepare for special food needs at a potluck meal if no one knows what those needs are. Use a simple survey with members of the group to determine if special food needs are present. There is a sample survey card in the additional resources with this lesson, plus a list of common special food terms and their meanings. It is not necessary to identify members of the group who have special food needs. It is just a method to communicate which dishes at the potluck meets specific needs. There might be small signs or colored dot stickers or color coded placemats available to identify these dishes. Post a sign explaining the color system. For example, if several people in the group express a need for low sodium foods, it might be decided to use blue to indicate foods with no added salt. Blue stickers or blue placemats might be made available for people who bring food with no added salt to identify those dishes.

Savvy Sign Up Sheets

Many groups use some sort of sign up system to organize their potluck meals. Any system could be adapted to implement a smarter potluck sign-up instead. Allow more space on the page for healthier options (salads, green vegetables) than less healthy options (starchy vegetables, desserts.) Include separate sections for foods such as green vegetables and fresh fruit. Specify water and low fat milk in addition to usual beverages. If the group usually only offers fried meats, include suggestions for healthier baked options and specify dressings on the side in the salad section.
Smarter Recipes

Many traditional potluck favorites come from years past when people might have been less aware of how foods can impact health. Those same recipes may likely be modified to be made with less salt, sugar, or fat, and increased fiber and nutrients. Check out the "Smarter Potlucks Hashbrown Casserole" recipe as an example of a healthier version of one potluck favorite.

In addition, look for new recipes to become favorites! All of the University of Kentucky's Nutrition Education program recipes meet nutritional guidelines consistent with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Find them at https://www.planeatmove.com. Contact the County Extension Agent for Family & Consumer Sciences Education at the local County Extension Service for more recipes.

Keep it Safe

Potluck meals are a wonderful way to share food and time with others. Food-borne illness is definitely something not to share! When preparing for a potluck meal, remember that following four simple steps can protect families and friends and keep food safe.

- Clean—Wash hands and surfaces often.
- Separate—Separate raw meats from other foods.
- Cook—Cook to the right temperature.
- Chill—Refrigerate food promptly.

For a potluck, that usually means making arrangements for travelling to the meal site and for holding food at a safe temperature until time to eat. Hot foods need to be kept over 140°F until serving time. A slow cooker may be used to transport food and be plugged in to keep warm at the site. Cold food needs to be kept below 40°F until serving time. Be sure that your hands and all containers and utensils that come in contact with food are clean.
How Does Our Potluck Measure Up?

Use the Sharing Meals assessment tool to determine how a potluck meal measures up. Try some changes from the Sharing Meals ideas, then measure again. Everyone wins with a smarter potluck.

Time for Action

Now it is time to put the information from Sharing Meals to work. Try these action steps:

1. Promote the importance of smarter potluck meals that offer healthier options and follow food safety guidelines.
2. Identify special food needs of individuals within the group.
3. Utilize sign-up method(s) that best fit the group’s needs.
4. Share with the group the five “smarter” potluck strategies on the “How Does Your Potluck Measure Up?” checklist:
   a.) Smarter Sizes
   b.) Smarter Line-up
   c.) Smarter Beverages
   d.) Smarter Fruits and Veggies
   e.) Smarter Sweets
5. Evaluate the potluck meal by completing the “How Does Your Potluck Measure Up?” checklist.
6. Complete the Sharing Meals Pledge.
Additional Resources

- **Sharing Meals PowerPoint presentation with speaker notes**

- **How Does Your Potluck Measure Up?** UK Cooperative Extension Service; Paula Plonski, MS, Extension Associate Senior

- **End of Program Evaluation.** UK Cooperative Extension Service; Paula Plonski, MS, Extension Associate Senior

- **Follow Up Evaluation (3 months).** UK Cooperative Extension Service; Paula Plonski, MS, Extension Associate Senior

- **Welcome to Our Table.** UK Cooperative Extension Service; Martha Yount, MS, Regional Extension Specialist

- **Sharing Meals Pledge Certificates.** UK Cooperative Extension Service; Martha Yount, MS, Regional Extension Specialist

- **Sample Sign Up Sheets.** UK Cooperative Extension Service; Martha Yount, MS, Regional Extension Specialist

- **Food Safety Guidelines for Potlucks.** UK Cooperative Extension Service; Stephanie Derifield, MS, Area Nutrition Agent

- **Special Food Needs.** UK Cooperative Extension Service; Jeannie Najor, MS, Program Coordinator

- **Tips for Avoiding Food Allergens.** UK Cooperative Extension Service; Jeannie Najor, MS, Program Coordinator

- **Smarter Potlucks Hashbrown Casserole Recipe.** UK Cooperative Extension Service; Martha Yount, MS, Regional Extension Specialist, and Jackie Walters, MBA, RD, Extension Specialist Senior

- **Let’s Talk Trash.** USDA; available at www.ChooseMyPlate.gov/lets-talk-trash


- **Mastering Food Choices: Modifying Recipes.** UK Cooperative Extension Service; Heather Norman-Burgdolf, PhD; available at http://www2.ca.uky.edu/agcomm/pubs/FCS3/FCS3606/FCS3606.pdf

- **Adapting Recipes.** UK Cooperative Extension Service; Sandra Bastin, PhD, RD, LD; available at http://www2.ca.uky.edu/HES/fcs/factshts/FN-SSB.001.pdf

- **Healthy Recipes** from UKNEP; available at https://www.planeatmove.com.

- **Lighten Up** from the UKNEP Curriculum; available at https://kynep.ca.uky.edu/system/files/hcfeb_ne212a_eng_kt_2018.pdf