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Heart Healthy Comfort Foods and Tips for Winter

Winter is generally synonymous with more indoor activities and of course common colds and flu. In addition, unhealthy eating habits as well as a lack of physical activity slowly creep in and become routine during these months. Calorie laden foods and snacking under the covers is so much more enticing than exercise and veggies! The result – weight gain and disappointment at the end of the season! Remember that healthy eating can still be a priority without having to omit those warm comfort foods that are so much more attractive and desirable in the colder weather.

1. Stick to regular meal and snack times

Avoid skipping main meals and snacks as this will only lead to overeating as well as feelings of guilt and remorse later on. Regular meals and snacks help maintain stable blood sugar levels preventing you from reaching out for that chocolate or piece of cake. Keep healthy snacks in your office drawer and avoid scoffing down your lunch by actually taking the time out to enjoy that lunch break.

2. Ideas for warm breakfasts

It is still vital to have breakfast even though sleeping in during these cold dark mornings might be more tempting. Warm breakfast options will definitely go down better than cold ones. Examples of these include cooked porridge (oats with a bit of honey and baked apple, maltabella or mielie meal), whole-wheat cereal with hot milk, scrambled egg, banana with drizzle of honey or peanut butter on toast. Whether you have it at home or at work, it does not matter - just make sure you have it!

3. Ideas for warm lunches

Most people are ravenous by lunch time. Due to convenience (and unfortunately at the expense of your health), it is easy to fall into the fast food trap of hot pies and hot dogs! If you find yourself eating take-outs more often than usual, it's time to consider packing your own lunch box! Making food and snacks from home will not only ensure that you have more control over what goes into your mouth, but it will also save you some cash.

Ideas for lunches include:

- Leftover dinner (this can be heated up if you have a microwave at work)
- Toasted sandwiches made with lower fat toppings; cheese, tuna, chicken (if you have a snackwich maker at work)
- Baked beans on toast
- Baked potato with low fat cottage cheese
- Toasted pita with hummus, lettuce and cucumber
- Soups (choose 'lite' options if you use ready-to-drink) with whole-wheat toast

Ideas for winter dinners:

- Non-creamy soups (vegetable or lentil-based soups, minestrone or chicken and corn)
- Warm pasta or lasagne dishes (using more vegetables, lower fat sauce and cheese toppings)
- Stir-fries
- Roasts (lean meat, chicken, turkey or pork) with vegetables and a baked potato
- Grilled fish and vegetable dishes
- Spicy curries with rice, tortillas or whole-wheat rotis
- Stews or casseroles with plenty of vegetables
- Baked fruit puddings with home made low fat custard

4. Vary the preparation method

Use different cooking methods to avoid boredom at meal times. Poaching, steaming, grilling, baking and stir-frying are all ideal heart healthy ways of preparing foods. When there is a need to use oil, opt for the mono- or polyunsaturated options like canola, olive or sunflower and remember to use them sparingly!

5. Consume more warm drinks

There's nothing better than a hot drink on an ice cold day! These include tea, coffee or cappuccino (made with fat free milk) and hot chocolate ('lite' version). If you are a heavy tea or coffee drinker, bear in mind that the advisable maximum daily consumption for tea is 8 cups and coffee, 4 cups. Decaffeinated or herbal options are also good choices and these can be alternated between the caffeinated ones.

6. Boosting your immune system

A healthy immune system is required to fight off infections, which are very common during these cold months. Beta carotene (found in orange, yellow or green fruit and vegetables), vitamin C (found in citrus fruits and green leafy vegetables) and vitamin E (found in nuts, seeds, whole-grains, soft tub margarines and vegetable oils) are powerful anti-oxidants and should be included in the diet daily. You can add a few nuts or seeds to your breakfast bowl and include more fruit and vegetables at lunch and dinner. This way your meal will not only be balanced, heart healthy and attractive, but also immune boosting!

7. Don't stop moving

The weather should not be a deterrent to exercising. No matter the season, the heart muscle still requires that bit of exercise to ensure optimum health. If you are a gym member, continue with your sessions - perhaps the late afternoon or evening time slot might work better than the usual early morning one. Choose indoor activities like skipping, dancing, aerobics, yoga, swimming (if you have access to an indoor heated pool) or cycling on a stationary bicycle.

So, don't let the winter season sabotage the progress you have made so far – a few smart choices will ensure that you stay on the right track.

For more heart smart nutrition information from registered dietitians, call the Heart Mark Diet Line on 0860 223 222 or email heart@heartfoundation.co.za

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