



Real Food Program participants have hands-on cooking experiences in the food laboratory.

Situation:

Americans spend approximately 80 percent of their food budgets on products that are highly processed, offer very little nutritional value, and contain a high amount of calories, unhealthy fat, and sugar. Consumption of processed foods and beverages is one of the main causes of the rise in obesity and obesity-related diseases of all ages seen today. Fast food is available just about everywhere, and processed foods make up the majority of foods at local supermarkets. Consumed consistently, people gain unhealthy excess weight and suffer diseases directly related to a high-calorie, low-nutrient diet.

With nearly 7 out of 10 Americans being overweight, 8.3 percent being affected with diabetes, and 1 in 4 dying of heart disease, the heavily processed, standard American diet is clearly in need of overhaul. But most people don't know how to go about changing their diets to a healthy one they can maintain for a lifetime. The Real Food Program's objective is to remove the confusion and frustration and give people tools they need to plan, shop, cook, and eat foods that are minimally processed, nutrient-rich, easy to prepare, and delicious.

The Real Food Program was designed as a five-week series with each week covering a new topic. Topics include:

- Definition of processed foods and whole foods; how to tell the difference.
- Packaging: how are products packaged to encourage you to buy them? What misleading practices are used? Detailed discussion on the nutrition label and ingredient list.
- Shopping and menu planning: learn how to plan and purchase whole, minimally processed ingredients while keeping within a budget.
- Organic and local foods: description of organic foods and whether they should be used. Information on how to locate local foods producers and their importance in our communities.



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Nutrition: What does healthy eating really mean?

Advertising was placed in the *Casper-Star Tribune* to promote the Real Food Program. The response was so huge a second program was scheduled for March/April, a third for May/June, and a fourth for September/October. Each program filled with the maximum 12 participants. All five classes in the series included hands-on cooking in the foods lab with a variety of recipes using fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, local meat and eggs, and fresh herbs. Participants made their own tortillas, granola, roasted vegetables, smoothies, meatballs, marinara sauce from fresh tomatoes, and a variety of other healthy recipes.

Impacts

Forty-two people completed the four 5-week series of classes throughout the year. Each participant filled out weekly program evaluations in addition to a longer post-program evaluation.

- 95 percent now read the nutrition label and/or ingredient list before purchasing.
- 100 percent responded “yes” to the question, “Has this program helped you make healthy eating changes?”
- 100 percent responded “yes” to the question, “Are you planning and preparing more meals now than you did before taking this program?”
- Participants reported they are now drinking less soda, eating out less often, cooking more at home, eating more vegetables, planning more menus, eating less sugar, and buying less packaged food.

Written comments from participants

“This program has changed how I shop: I was at the store with my husband the other day, and we both noticed that our cart seemed less full because they were no boxes of food filling it up, just lots of fruits and vegetables!”

“We pay attention to labels and ingredients. We have stopped drinking pop. We are more aware of what we are eating, and my husband has lost weight.”



The Real Food Program encourages a variety of recipes that include fresh fruit, whole grains, local meat and eggs, and fresh vegetables.

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