**Meal Planning for a Healthier You!**

Continuing on with ways to ensure a healthier you for National Nutrition Month is meal planning and prepping. Cooking in bulk along with a little creativity can go a long way with maintaining a healthy lifestyle. When you have healthy meal options ready to go in your fridge and freezer, your family members and you will have an easier time making a healthy choice when seeking a meal or snack.

When you are running out the door in the morning having a ready-made egg white burrito, boiled eggs, or a baked oatmeal casserole in your fridge ready to go, it will prevent you from swinging by the closest fast food choice for a breakfast meal. When that mid-afternoon snack craving hits, having some pre made and portion sized trail mix, energy bites, or crackers and cheese on hand can leave you satisfied while providing the energy you need to continue on with your day. Most importantly, when it is dinner time, having the bulk of your meal prepared can allow you to spend more time outdoors going on a walk/run or taking your kids to the neighborhood park.

Let’s compare some of those meal prep ideas with fast food options. On average, a fast food burrito can contain about 600 calories with almost half of those coming from fat alone, and let’s not forget those tots and the drink that tag along the meal. Making an egg white burrito at home with a whole wheat tortilla is around 250-300 calories and can be packed with protein and fiber while being low in fat. Now let’s take a look at some afternoon snacks. While strolling to the vending machine seems like a quick and easy choice for a snack, a bag of potato chips or a pop tart can be anywhere from 300-500 calories with no nutritional value. However, a string cheese packed from home along with a small apple or crackers will set you up with about 150-180 much needed after noon calories along with protein, vitamins and helping avoid that 2 p.m. crash.

Overall, meal planning advantages include cutting your calories and cost in half. It helps having healthy food options available to pick from to avoid making unhealthy choices, especially when hungry. Taking on meal planning takes some trial and error but give it a shot to make it part of your lifestyle and you will find out that your healthy life can become much simpler to maintain.

**Here are some ideas to try out:**

**Breakfast:** In a muffin tin, place several spinach leaves in each slot along with about 1 tbsp. of chopped tomato. In a bowl, whisk 6 eggs and 6 egg whites together and season with salt and pepper. Pour egg mixture evenly among the muffin tins and bake for 20-25 minutes till egg mixture is set. Enjoy 2-3 per serving.

**Lunch:** Place 1.5 pounds of chicken breast in the slow cooker and cover with one packet low sodium taco seasoning and one 16 oz. jar of your favorite salsa. Cook on high for 4 hours and shred with two forks before serving. Enjoy with a side salad and rice, or stuff it in a small sweet potato with your favorite toppings.

**Dinner:** Make your favorite tacos or tostadas with a side of beans.

**Snacks:** carrots w/ hummus, snack size apple with peanut butter, 100 calorie yogurt cup, string cheese, or try out some delicious energy bites by combining 1 cup quick cook oats w/ ½ cup of your favorite nut butter, ¼ cup dark mini chocolate chips, 1/3 cup honey, and 2 tbsps. flax or chia seeds (optional). Mix it all together and roll it into tea spoon balls and refrigerate. Some other fun mix-ins could be dried cranberries, sunflower seeds, toasted coconut, pecans, etc.