Clean Your Plate

Some say the typical American diet is “dirty,” that it leads to obesity and an addiction to salty, sugary and refined convenience foods. But cleaner options abound—just eat more pure and natural foods that are both nutritious and delicious.

September 3, 2010 By Gerrie E. Summers

Charles, an employee for a New York City car service, hears a lot of stories—and offers a lot of advice. Whenever passengers mention asthma and high cholesterol, he rattles off a list of wholesome foods for them to try. The Haitian-born driver only eats fresh, clean foods that he prepares at home.

Charles began eating this way when he found out he had high blood pressure. As his sedan sits in traffic in midtown Manhattan (enough to send anyone’s blood pressure soaring) he extols the benefits of cooking with healthier oils, such as extra virgin olive oil, and eating a diet rich in whole grains and legumes. He purchases fresh market vegetables and liquefies them—stems and all—in an industrial-strength juicer for a daily green tonic. Whether he knows it or not, Charles is part of a popular movement that supports eating “clean,” that is, consuming unprocessed food not usually found in a bag, box or can.

These whole, unprocessed, natural foods don’t contain man-made ingredients or unnecessary additives, says dietitian Diane A. Welland, MS, RD. But African Americans consume less of them than all other ethnic groups. Ironically, these are precisely the kinds of foods African Americans and other minorities should eat because these populations tend to have a higher risk of almost all diet-related diseases compared with whites.

These diet-related illnesses include high blood pressure, heart disease, type 2 diabetes, obesity and cancer. African Americans in particular have a higher rate of high blood pressure (hypertension) because of obesity and diets that are high in fat and sodium. And blacks also eat fewer fruits and vegetables than all other ethnic groups, according to the Office of Minority Health. But eating a healthy diet rich in fruits and vegetables, along with getting regular physical activity, can help lower the risk of these diseases.

What’s unhealthy is that a huge portion of African-American cuisine consists of age-old, traditional meals many know best as “soul food,” which tends to be heavy on meat and loaded with sodium.

Interestingly, soul food includes collards and other greens, legumes, and beans and rice, which are

actually healthy stuff. But our cooking methods rob these foods of nutrients and make African-American diets high in fat and low in fiber.

"Many of these types of foods can be adapted to a healthier style of eating, without the dishes losing their cultural heritage," says Welland, author of *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Eating Clean*. "For example, oven-fried chicken or fish can be just as juicy and delicious as the deep-fried version, but with much less fat. Collard greens are an excellent example of a perfect dish for clean eaters, [but only if] made with low sodium chicken broth without the bacon or ham hocks."

Reducing the amount of salt also allows the true taste of the vegetables or meat to shine through, Welland says. "As you decrease salt, sugar and fat, your taste buds will adjust and become accustomed to this style of cooking and eating. After a few weeks, you may even find you prefer these lighter foods over the traditional dishes."

Welland suggests that if blacks would return to their African-American cooking roots, they'd find that many of the dishes were braised and stewed. "These kinds of cooking methods are lighter and more in line with the clean-eating lifestyle," she says. "But they take more time."

So how do we purge our diet of refined, processed convenience foods and prepare more healthful, home-cooked meals? "Like anything, it's best to start gradually and work your way up, growing into the lifestyle over time," Welland advises. "Think about it in small steps. This makes it a lot easier to do."

To begin, start with something simple. "Get rid of frozen dinners, or drink water instead of soda," she suggests. "Then switch to whole grain breads or brown rice followed by a focus on meats and vegetables."

But change doesn't happen overnight, Welland cautions. It also takes time for your taste buds to acclimate to less sugar, salt and fat.

Welland's game plan calls for people to separate the whole and processed foods in their pantries and refrigerators. "Throw out processed foods, or box them and put them aside," she says. "It's all a matter of what works for you and your lifestyle. Tossing these foods will also make room for restocking your pantry with fresh, all-natural foods."

James McKinney, 49, a program analyst for Homeland Security in Maryland, decided to use the clean-foods diet concept to ditch extra pounds he carried and the high blood pressure medicine he took. "I was always feeling sluggish and just didn't like what I was seeing in the mirror," he says.

First, McKinney underwent a medical checkup and started an exercise program. "At the same time, I gave up all fried food and bread completely," he says. "No chips, fast food or red meat."

McKinney also began eating more fruits and vegetables. "It wasn't that hard," he says. "Once my mind-set was right, it became easier."

Today, McKinney is 50 pounds lighter and has “energy through the roof.” McKinney says his entire family adopted his clean eating plan and have also benefited. “My wife was always a small woman, but wasn’t in the greatest physical shape,” he shares. “She’s also seen her energy level increase, [which] has sparked her to be more interested in physical activities.”

TO START A CLEAN EATING LIFESTYLE:

1. Choose whole, natural foods over processed foods.

Fresh vegetables, fruits and meat are the main elements. “Too many times people start out with processed or convenience foods for these main items,” Welland says. “Start with fresh foods first.”

2. Choose unrefined over refined products.

Choose brown rice over white, whole grain flour over white and whole wheat or whole grain bread over white bread. And use less refined sweeteners such as honey, maple syrup and dehydrated sugar cane juice over white sugar.

3. Eat well-balanced meals.

Make sure each meal contains some carbohydrate, protein and fat. Instead of eating just an apple, grab an apple with a piece of cheese or a glass of skim milk. Another meal suggestion is whole-wheat pasta with vegetables and lean steak or a chicken breast. “If you eat this way, meals will naturally be low in fat, sodium and sugar, with no one ingredient dominating another,” Welland says. “Typical American foods are high in fat and salt or fat and sugar. This is why many people who follow a ‘clean’ diet automatically lose weight, sometimes without even trying.”

4. Eat small portions, about five to six meals per day.

A good count for a meal portion is 500 calories, or less for snacks, Welland suggests. “Eating throughout the day prevents you from overeating at one meal and keeps your energy level up high all day long.”

5. Don’t drink your calories.

The number of liquid calories we down should total no more than 200 for a 2,000-calorie diet, Welland says. “Most of us drink about 21 percent of our calories,” she says. “On a 2,000-calorie diet, that’s about 400 calories. We should aim for half that amount.” Her suggestion for clean drinks? Unsweetened tea, sparkling water, skim milk and juices diluted with water or sparkling water.

6. Get moving.

Slowly add regular physical activity into your day. “If you can’t get to the gym, then take a walk at lunch or climb the stairs instead of using the elevator,” Welland says. “It makes a big difference.”

To avoid succumbing to handy-dandy convenience foods in a pinch, cook clean meals you can freeze and later reheat in the microwave, Welland advises. Create “go-to” meals for those times when you find yourself hungry and need something quick, she adds.

Mastery over this lifestyle is something that happens when you become accustomed to eating

clean and become more proficient in the kitchen, Welland says. But it also takes commitment to yourself and a willingness to make an attitude adjustment.

“Sure, it takes more time to cook meals from scratch,” she says, “but you can always decide how much time you’ll devote to cooking.”

May I Take Your Order, Please?
How to stay clean when the menu pickings are slim

James McKinney is “very picky” about what he’ll eat at restaurants and will “even forgo the meal” if there’s nothing that meets his clean-eating diet plan. But not everyone has that kind of willpower. These tips will help you stay on track while dining out, when the spirit is willing, but the flesh may be weak:

- When going to gatherings at a friend’s home, bring a healthy dish that you can share with everyone.
- Before office parties or other events, have a meal. You won’t be hungry later and tempted to eat something unhealthy during the soirees.
- Carry healthy snacks, such as trail mix (that you make) to avoid the urge to grab a quick hot dog when you’re on the go.
- When fast food is your only option, choose the healthiest options on the menu. For example, at fast-food burger palaces keep it simple. “Skip the extra sauces and special accompaniments and especially skip the fries,” Welland says. “Opt for the fruit salad or fruit-and-yogurt parfait. And choose unsweetened tea.”

But if all of the above fail, consider the forbidden foods part of your “weekly cheat meal”—a once-a-week meal that is not particularly “clean” but reserved for special occasions like parties or dining out.

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