Meal Makeovers

Stealthy tricks can make even packaged foods healthier—really!

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You've just finished a 10-hour workday—you're tired, you're hungry, and your kids want to know what's for dinner. All you want to do is relax, and the fastest way to get there is with an easy meal that everyone will love.

So you swing by the drive-through or pick up a couple pizzas. Maybe you go a step further and slap together burgers with mac and cheese, or decide to do breakfast for dinner and whip up pancakes from a mix.

Dinner's done and you can finally kick back—but there's one problem. All that salt- or sugar-laden, processed, refined convenience food is, well, bad—bad for your heart, your skin, your waistline and your health in general.

But before you slip into a guilt spiral, here's some good news: You can easily make over your favorite meals (including pizza, soda and cake) into healthier versions without doing more time in the kitchen or blowing your grocery budget. How? Here, Missy Chase Lapine, the food makeover maven and author of the bestselling cookbook The Sneaky Chef, serves up some need-to-know info that's easy and fast to digest.

Salt and Sugar: How Much Is Too Much?
The American Heart Association (AHA) recommends no more than 1,500 milligrams of sodium (salt) per day. Yet 98 percent of Americans eat more than twice that amount. That's because we often rely on processed foods (think everything from canned soups to frozen dinners), which account for a whopping 75 percent of our sodium intake.

There are compelling reasons to cut back on salt: A high-sodium diet boosts your chance of developing high blood pressure, which can lead to everything from heart disease and stroke to kidney damage and angina (a type of chest pain caused by reduced blood flow to the heart).

But salt isn't the only culprit. The average American consumes about 22 teaspoons of added

sugars every day. Added sugars are different from natural sugars found in, for example, milk or fruit. Added sugars are just that: sugar, honey or chemically manufactured sweeteners that are dumped into food and beverages during processing.

The AHA recommends men limit their added sugar intake to nine teaspoons per day, while it suggests women stop at six. But it's easy to overdo it. The AHA warns that sodas and sweetened beverages, such as fruit punch, add tons of sugar and calories to our diets without providing any nutritional benefits, which puts us at higher risk of obesity and diabetes.

Busy Schedules = Convenience Foods

Knowing the health risks of salty, sugary processed foods is one thing. But when you work long hours and have a to-do list that just doesn't seem to end, convenience foods are easy and tempting to turn to come mealtime—even when they're not good for you.

"It's the nature of our busy lives today," Lapine says. "We all would do anything for the health of our families, but our best intentions can get squashed by time demands."

In her new cookbook, The Speedy Sneaky Chef, Lapine, who's well-known for her creative and crafty food makeovers, delivers 75 fast recipes for busy, health-conscious folks who want to eat well without spending hours over the stove or emptying their wallets at the grocery store.

Lapine's recipes combine the best of both worlds: convenience and good health. "There are a dozen recipes in this book that can be literally cooked in two minutes," she says. "You can't even defrost a frozen chicken nugget in that time."

What's the trick? Well, Lapine is all about the "sneaky swap"—replacing unhealthy ingredients with their nutritious cousins, so that you can enjoy your favorite foods without all the salt, sugar, fat and empty calories. In her recipes, Lapine just swaps a bad food for a good one, and your taste buds are none the wiser. It's an easy way to "hide" healthy foods in your family's favorite meals, Lapine says.

Skeptical? The next time you make baked potatoes or tacos, try one of Lapine's recent super-simple swaps: plain, nonfat Greek yogurt in place of high-fat sour cream (the yogurt tastes just like sour cream but is loaded with protein and low in carbs).

Also use Greek yogurt to make a quick, healthier onion dip: just blend the creamy, tangy cultured milk with onion powder, crunchy minced onions and fresh pepper. This version is so much healthier than store-bought onion dip, which is usually chock-full of the flavor-enhancing food additive MSG.

Easy Meal Makeovers

If the idea of eating healthy gives you unpleasant visions of plain chicken, naked veggies and tasteless grains, think again. You can have the same tasty, flavor-rich meals your family loves—just make them over with a few simple tips.

How about transforming this perennial fast-food favorite: french fries. Did you know that a large order of fries weighs in at about 500 calories, 25 grams of fat and 350 milligrams of sodium. Yikes!

Here's what to do. Bake these potato strips in the oven and get all the tasty goodness of oven-crisp french fries for a fraction of the calories, fat and salt. Also, consider this: An Idaho potato has about 110 calories, no fat and no sodium. Slice it up, toss it with heart-healthy olive oil, and sprinkle the slices with a little salt—or chili powder if you want a little zing. Bake for 20 to 30 minutes at 425 degrees. The result? Fries that wow your taste buds but won't pack on the pounds.

The same goes for boxed foods, too. Making over mac and cheese is, thankfully, a snap. Start with a mix that's white, Lapine says—that neon yellow glow is the result of artificial colors. If you still want that familiar hue, add a sprinkle of paprika or a slice of American cheese into the mix. Then amp up the health factor by cutting the amount of cheese sauce or powder and replacing it with one of Lapine's signature purees: a blend of carrots and sweet potatoes that increases the volume of a sauce without adding cheese; the puree also infuses the dish with a light sweetness, and it sneaks in veggies.

If the idea of adding a puree to food is new to you, get acquainted with Lapine's No. 1 way to sneak nutrient-dense fruits and veggies into your favorite meals. Adding pureed vegetables to main dishes can cut calories without sacrificing texture or taste, according to recent studies from Penn State University.

Lapine created five all-purpose, make-ahead purees—which you can find free on TheSneakyChef.com. And you don't need to buy a bulky appliance: Lapine uses a small $40 food processor to make all her purees.

White Puree is a mix of cauliflower and zucchini. Add it to any tomato-based sauce, barbecue sauce or chili—even SpaghettiOs, Lapine says.

Orange Puree (carrots and sweet potatoes) works in soups, stews, pasta sauce, and mac and cheese. "The sweet potato is the anti-diabetes veggie," Lapine says, since it helps to keep your blood sugar stable.

Green Puree blends frozen sweet peas, raw baby spinach and fresh or frozen broccoli. Use this versatile puree to double the volume of guacamole, or mix it with tomato paste to make meatballs or meatloaf.

Purple Puree is made from frozen blueberries and raw baby spinach. It takes just 30 seconds in a blender, and you can use it in brownie mix, pancakes, hamburgers or tacos. "It adds juiciness and sweetness to everything," Lapine says.

White Bean Puree is a mix of canned cannellini or butter beans, and water. Use it in everything from muffin mixes to Lapine's Super Simple Microwave Lasagna. You can even use it as a mayo substitute in coleslaw or chicken salad.

Curious as to whether there are any dishes that simply can't be made healthy? "The only one I have trouble with is deep-fried Twinkies from the state fair," Lapine says. But everything else is fair game for a meal makeover.

Get Your Grub On Tonight
Try Lapine's Parmesan Chicken Fries—a made-over fast food that will please even the pickiest palate.

Cooking time: 14 minutes
Makes 4 servings

- 2 tablespoons ground flaxseed
- 2 tablespoons wheat germ
- 2 tablespoons grated Parmesan cheese
- 1 cup bread crumbs, ideally whole grain
- 12 ounces uncooked boneless, skinless, thinly sliced chicken breasts
- Cooking spray oil

Dip:
- ½ cup store-bought marinara sauce
- ¼ cup Sneaky Chef Orange Puree

Preheat oven to 425° and coat a baking sheet with cooking spray.
Cut chicken breast into "finger"-shaped strips, ideally using kitchen scissors.
Combine flax, wheat germ, grated Parmesan and bread crumbs in a large zip-top plastic bag, then add chicken and shake to coat.
Spray chicken fingers with cooking oil. Bake for 12–14 minutes.

Cut It Out!
Say good-bye to sodium, sugar and fat with a few simple swaps.

This handy cheat-sheet offers common substitutes that will help you make over everything from drinks to dinner to dessert. As you experiment with new recipes, just add to the list. Soon, you'll be wondering, "Why didn't I try this before?"

Love this?	Try this?
Store-bought salad dressing	Balsamic vinegar mixed with olive oil or lemon juice
Salted or honey-roasted peanuts	Raw almonds or cashews
Ground beef	Ground turkey
White rice	Quinoa
Soda or sugary juice	Seltzer with sliced fruit or berries
Mashed potatoes	Mashed parsnips and cauliflower

Ice-cream sandwich	Graham cracker sandwich with frozen Cool Whip
Fast-food breakfast sandwich	Eggs, Swiss cheese and turkey bacon or turkey sausage on an English muffin

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