Connecting around Food during COVID-19: Opportunities for Parents and Caregivers

Many of our routines and structures have been turned upside down. The one thing that continues to be essential is that we still need to eat! Without stockpiling food, how can we connect food and eating with joy during these times? By seeking ways to connect with food and take the pressure off ourselves and our kids, we create opportunities to nurture healthy eating.

Note: We can go out to purchase food within a safe distance from others if we are showing no symptoms, have not returned from recent travel, or been in contact with someone who has travelled recently. If a household member has symptoms, they need to self-isolate in the house which includes not handling food for others, using separate dishes and eating in a different space.

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1) **Cooking with kids in the kitchen**: Take advantage of being at home. Pull out a favourite recipe to cook. Grandma’s chicken noodle soup...mmmm! Check out these 10 tips to get your kids in the kitchen or these ideas for getting your family inspired in the kitchen together, and you may be surprised at how much young children can do in the kitchen and how even teenagers can get excited to help out. Whatever your skill level, there are ideas for every stage from toddlers to teens. Bonus, kids are more likely to eat and enjoy what they’ve helped prepare! This is also a great opportunity to practice proper hand-hygiene.

2) **Create a routine structure of sit down meals and snacks**: Even though the news is changing daily, aiming to provide food at regular times can help children feel secure and that they have some consistency right now. We can support healthy eating when we build in the routine of regular meals and snacks even when the school routine is not there. Creating structure isn’t always easy and it may take time to figure out what is best for your family. Consider finding
ways to make it special. Homemade paper placemats may not last long but can be a great activity idea for kids. So, what to do in between breakfast, lunch, dinner, and planned snacks? Offer kids the option of water or waiting until the next meal or snack before redirecting to another activity. Choice can be key!

3) **You provide, they decide:** Adults can be powerful role models. Allow children to decide *whether and how much to eat of the foods offered* to support positive, lower stress mealtimes. And, in the long run, healthier eaters. That doesn’t mean they can’t have a say in the menu before it gets on the table. Now is a great time to pull out any favourites you or your kids enjoy. There’s nothing like sharing your comfort food to bring family together as we’re socially distancing from others. Looking for more ideas? Check out the BC community recipes on BetterTogetherBC, submit your own recipe to the site, or even create your own cookbook!

4) **Growing food with kids:** Getting hands dirty with growing food can not only support healthy eating in the long run, but also mental well-being! Consider these tips for *starting an indoor garden* or getting outside *in the garden* with kids.

5) **Plan ahead to feed your family:** Minimize trips to the grocery store and reduce waste by *making plans* around what to prepare for the week. Consider meals that are versatile and make enough for *leftovers*. Soups, stews and casseroles are great to freeze as leftovers for the following week. You can also batch cook ingredients for several different meals such as pre-cooking dried lentils or roasting a whole chicken to use over a few days. Stir-fry dishes are a great way to use up leftover produce. Make sure you *store perishables* to help them last as long as possible. Most of all, include foods that you enjoy eating as a family.

6) **Can I get Covid-19 from food?** Covid-19 is *not being spread through food*. When preparing food, the suggestion, as always, is to follow standard food safety practices, including *hand-hygiene* and washing and scrubbing fruit and vegetables with water.

7) **What’s in your cupboard and fridge?** Sort through non-perishables in your cupboards, fridge and freezer to figure out what you have. Check best before dates. Best-before dates refer to quality, not safety; they tell you how long a product will maintain its peak freshness. Eggs, milk and yogurt can be eaten safely soon after their best-before dates have passed, provided they’ve been stored properly. Make a list of what you need for breakfast, lunch, dinner and snacks.
Have some non-perishable items on-hand that you can easily make simple meals from and keep costs down. It is best to purchase these items over time rather than all at once. Consider including some of these items to use when you plan for one to two weeks.

These are items that can be used year round:
- Grain products: dried pasta, noodles, rice, couscous, barley, oatmeal, rolled oats, ready-to-eat cereal
- Canned goods: vegetables and fruit (e.g. canned tomatoes, tomato paste, applesauce), fish (e.g. tuna, sardines, salmon), canned or dried legumes (e.g. lentils, chickpeas, black beans), vegetable or chicken broth
- Baking products: Flour, baking powder, baking soda
- Peanut butter or nut/seed butter, cooking oil, vinegars, dried herbs, spices, condiments

Basic perishables:
- Frozen vegetables, fruit, meat,
- Bread- can be frozen and used by the slice
- Consider including vegetables that can be stored longer (see below)
- Tofu, eggs, yogurt, cheese, milk and plant-based drinks can be stored longer in the fridge if left unopened

8) What does two weeks of food look like? In these times, it’s a great idea to keep food supplies on-hand that will last for two weeks especially if you have symptoms so it is not safe for you to shop. Consider including some of the above basic non-perishable items that are missing from your pantry to help extend your supplies further. You may find it helpful to pull inspiration on what foods to bring home based on its shelf-life. See the following list for some ideas. Choose the foods and amounts that fit the needs of your household.

One week shelf life:
- Fresh leafy greens
- Berries, bananas, pears
- Fresh meat, fish

Two weeks (or longer) shelf life:
- Tofu, eggs, yogurt, cheese, milk and/or plant-based drinks can be stored longer in the fridge if left unopened
- potatoes, sweet potatoes, winter squash, beets, carrots, cabbage and onions
- Apples, oranges, dried fruit, nuts, seeds
9) **Helping others:** If you have no symptoms, you can grocery shop for friends and neighbours who may not be able to leave their home. Learn about more ways to help at the United Way and BetteratHome.ca.

10) **Looking for where to access lower cost food?** Check out the VCH food asset map webpage for updates. If you’re looking for updated information in your neighbourhood, check with individual organizations for current services and hours of operation.

11) **What food should I eat right now?** Consider making the food you have ingredients for, know how to prepare, and that you enjoy. All foods fit in a healthy pattern of eating. Maybe you want to share your famous chocolate chip cookie recipe with your kids. Yum! Find times to sit down and eat together. Get curious about the flavours and textures of the food. When providing meals with kids, consider “build your own” options, such as a grain-bowl buffet for dinner or an oatmeal buffet at breakfast. Tacos and pizza are other options that provide a variety of filling and toppings as children are learning to enjoy a greater variety of foods.

12) **Support yourself and your family with a healthy relationship with food:** Family meals are an opportunity to appreciate food and time with each other. It can be hard to do when diet culture is everywhere, reinforcing messages that our food choices and bodies aren’t good enough. How can we reconsider dieting and explore shifting to a more positive relationship with food and our bodies? Check out these resources:

- **How to raise kids with a healthy body image** - article with related links for more information
- **The Journey from Dieting to Healthy Eating** - Further content on this topic can be found in the accompanying Backgrounder for The Journey from Dieting to Healthy Eating.

Go easy on yourself. As parents and caregivers, you are doing the best that you can in these uncertain times. What works for one person will be different for someone else. Getting food on the table is only one part of the picture. Look for ways to build connection and enjoyment to help cope with stress. During this time of social distancing, we wish everyone health and pleasure with eating today and in the long run.

If you have specific questions about a child’s nutrition, you can contact HealthLinkBC at 8-1-1 to speak to a registered dietitian or email a HealthLinkBC dietitian.

*Written by Vancouver Coastal Health Child and Youth Public Health Dietitians, April 1, 2020*