

Culinary Medicine: A Prescription for Healthier Eating

Imagine walking into your doctor's office for a visit and, instead of walking out with another prescription, you leave with a handful of recipes—along with food-shopping and cooking tips to help you prepare your home-cooked meals. The concept may not be as farfetched as it sounds, especially if your doctor's visit is with a certified chef and health coach like Rani Polak, M.D., who stands at the forefront of a developing field known as culinary medicine.

What is culinary medicine?

"Culinary medicine teaches patients about healthy cooking so they can prepare more meals at home," says chef coach Dr. Polak, founder of the Chef Coaching program at the Institute of Lifestyle Medicine at the Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital, Harvard Medical School, in Boston.

For people with chronic conditions such as diabetes or obesity, whose doctors give them nutritional advice and guidelines to follow, figuring out how to follow that advice is often frustrating, especially if they lack culinary skills, are on a limited budget or have food preferences at odds with the recommendations. Culinary medicine seeks to give patients the tools they need to implement their doctors' dietary advice. And you don't have to be a patient to benefit from culinary medicine—anyone looking to improve his or her eating habits can learn how to cook healthier meals at home.

Why is home meal preparation important? First, 43 percent of all food spending by Americans in 2012 was on food prepared away from home, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Second, foods prepared outside the home typically contain more calories, saturated fats and sodium than home-cooked meals. Eating out also makes it tough to meet recommendations for fruit and vegetable servings and consume an adequate amount of nutrients like calcium, fiber and iron.

Of course, it's one thing to read about what you should be eating or have your doctor suggest what to consume. But it's quite another thing to actually put a healthful diet into practice. Culinary medicine, says Dr. Polak, can help bridge that gap and break through such barriers as inadequate cooking skills or confidence, lack of time and a poor understanding of dietary recommendations.

The coaching connection

The Chef Coaching program, which Dr. Polak developed and implemented with Edward Phillips, M.D., the founder and director of the Institute of Lifestyle Medicine, aims to empower patients and clients to make healthier food choices by giving them the skills they need to prepare affordable home-cooked meals in a minimal amount of time. Two additional programs provide professional education to chefs, who become certified to deliver Chef Coaching programs, and to doctors, other health professionals and health coaches, who become certified to include culinary goals in their work with patients and clients.

Health coaching is essential to the success of culinary medicine, says Dr. Polak, because coaches can help their clients set culinary goals and change their behaviors by supporting them while making them accountable for their actions.

A growing body of research shows that health coaching, both in-person and remotely, is effective in helping people make positive dietary changes. A 2011 *New England Journal of Medicine* study found that nutritional coaching by phone and email helped obese people lose as much weight as they did with in-person coaching visits.

Some insurance companies cover health-coaching services, and certain employers and hospitals may offer such programs for free.

Getting a culinary education

The participants in the Institute of Lifestyle Medicine's Chef Coaching program meet with their coaches once a week for 12 weeks via Skype or phone. This design makes it easy and convenient for anyone anywhere to attend the program remotely. During each session, participants review their goals, identify barriers to eating and cooking at home and acknowledge successes. The chef coach answers cooking questions and refers clients to videos they can watch to develop their culinary skills and learn about meal planning and purchasing and storing food.

"At the end of the day, healthy eating is about food, not about micronutrients such as protein and fat, so that's what culinary medicine focuses on," Dr. Polak says.

Ideally, he'd like to see chef coaching and culinary medicine eventually be part of a turnkey approach to patient care: A doctor would refer a patient to a nutritionist who would generate dietary guidelines and send him or her to a credentialed chef coach who in turn would work with the patient to develop the real-world skills needed to easily follow the diet and improve the patient's specific self-care.

Getting started on your own

While it's ideal to have a chef coach to support and encourage you to cook, you can also start making some changes on your own to buy and prepare more food at home. Try the recipes at right created by Dr. Polak, and follow these tips he shares with his patients:

■ **Commit to cooking more often.** Start with a simple recipe, maybe once a week—like adding whole-wheat pasta to boiled water—to get yourself into the cooking habit.

■ **Cook food for multiple meals.** To cut down on cooking time, make large batches of a dish, portion it out and freeze servings for future consumption.

Healthy doctor-approved recipes from Rani Polak, M.D.

Sea bass with vegetables and chickpeas

Serves 4 / Serving size: 1 fillet + 1/2 cup vegetables

Ingredients

Chickpeas

2 pounds dry chickpeas, soaked overnight and drained (½ cup for this recipe)
5 quarts water
1 tablespoon baking soda
½ teaspoon Atlantic sea salt
½ teaspoon ground black pepper

Fish

2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
4 cloves garlic, finely chopped
1½ pounds Swiss chard, stalks removed and thinly sliced
Pinch Atlantic sea salt
Pinch ground black pepper
2 cups dry white wine
Four 4-ounce sea bass fillets
2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice
2 medium tomatoes, cut into ¼-inch cubes

Directions

Prepare chickpeas: In a large pot, combine chickpeas, water and baking soda and bring to a boil over high heat. Reduce heat to medium and cook, uncovered, for about 2 hours, until chickpeas are soft. Drain chickpeas, season with salt and pepper, and set aside to cool. Reserve ½ cup chickpeas for this recipe and transfer the rest to freezer-safe storage bags or containers. Freeze for up to four months.

Prepare fish: Place wok on medium-high heat and add oil, swirling to coat. Add garlic and sauté gently for 3 minutes, until brown. Add Swiss chard, salt and pepper and steam until chard wilts, about 3 minutes. Using a slotted spoon, remove chard from pan and transfer to a plate.

Add wine to pan and bring to a boil over medium-high heat. Add fish and cook for 5 minutes, until fish is opaque. Add chickpeas, lemon juice, tomatoes and chard and cook for 3 minutes.

Nutrition information: calories, 282; total fat, 10 g; calories as fat, 32%; saturated fat, 2 g; cholesterol, 45 mg; carbohydrate, 15 g; dietary fiber, 4 g; sodium, 682 mg; protein, 25 g

Orange lentil salad with feta and fresh herbs

Serves 8 / Serving size: 1/2 cup

Ingredients

7 ounces split orange lentils, picked over and rinsed
2 pinches Atlantic sea salt
3 tablespoons fresh lemon juice
3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
1 clove garlic, crushed
1 tablespoon chopped fresh mint
2 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley
1 ounce low-fat semi-soft white cheese, such as feta
Pinch ground black pepper

Directions

Place lentils in a small pot and add water with a pinch of salt to cover. Bring to a boil over medium heat, and then immediately remove from heat and drain. Rinse lentils in cold water and drain in a colander.

Transfer lentils to a salad bowl. Add lemon juice, oil, garlic, mint, parsley and cheese. Let sit for at least 30 minutes at room temperature for flavors to blend. Add salt and pepper before serving.

Nutrition information: calories, 125; total fat 5 g; calories as fat, 36%; saturated fat, 1 g; cholesterol, 3 mg; carbohydrate, 15 g; dietary fiber, 3 g; sodium, 114 mg; protein, 6 g



Sea bass with vegetables and chickpeas

Orange lentil salad with feta and fresh herbs



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If you plan to grill a chicken breast, for example, instead grill two and save one for lunch tomorrow. You can also make more than one dish at a time: If you're making a roast, bake marinated vegetables on another oven shelf.

■ **Keep bulgur—a dried, cracked wheat—in your pantry.** It's a healthy grain that takes only five minutes to cook.

■ **Get to know your legumes—beans, black-eyed peas, chickpeas and lentils.** They're nutritious, filling and easy to prepare. To save time, put lentils on the stove to boil while you're cooking another meal. By the time you're done eating, the lentils will be finished and ready to store for later use as a side dish or in a soup, salad or stew.

For more information

For more evidence-based tips, healthy eating and cooking resources, and other information, visit Dr. Polak's Chef Coaching website at www.instituteoflifestylemedicine.org/services/chef-coaching/. To learn more about the Chef Coaching program, call 617-952-6016 or email info@instituteoflifestylemedicine.org.