

In the Nutrition Lane

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If It Tastes Good, It Can't Be Good For You...

Our food decisions are influenced by many factors, taste being a primary determinant for most people. It is a rare individual who chooses to eat collard greens just because they are nutritious. Most of us know the difference between foods that enhance health and those with little nutritional value. In fact, we sometimes get into that internal dialogue between our intellect and our taste buds - what we *should* eat versus what we *want* to eat. But wouldn't it be wonderful if our taste buds were aligned with our brains, and foods we really liked were also those that taste great? Guess what: It's possible to shape your own taste preferences toward healthier foods.

The good news for anyone trying to make dietary changes is that *taste preferences are learned*. Generally, humans are neo-phobic about food, which means we distrust and dislike anything new; we tend to like what we are accustomed to, what's familiar. But we also have the capacity to intentionally change an eating practice, which over time becomes familiar, and even preferred. Many people have experienced this when switching from whole to skim milk, or from regular to diet sodas. It often begins with an intellectual decision, for example, *I think I'll start drinking skim milk, which has all of the nutrients of whole milk, but with none of those eight grams of fat per cup*. If practiced consistently (and consistency is crucial to taste preference change), a new taste preference emerges. It is common to hear a former whole milk drinker wonder how he ever used to drink that milk that now tastes too thick and creamy.

Declarations such as "I'll never drink that watery milk with no taste!" may be equally common, and the person with this attitude is probably exactly right. With a mind-set that refuses to consider possibilities, it is very unlikely that these food preferences can change.

For the person who is trying to tilt her diet more toward vegetables, beans, lean meats, fish, and fruit, and away from a diet heavy in fast foods and empty calories, learning to truly like more nutritious foods is key to being able to replace poorer choices without feeling deprived. For example, most of us enjoy pizza, and most of us like to eat a certain volume of food. If you like salad (or any other vegetable) to accompany that pizza, you may eat less pizza and be equally satisfied as the person whose more narrow taste preference excludes salad.

As mentioned, consistency in practice is essential to changing a taste preference. In addition, it is important to introduce the new food or food preparation gradually, and often along with other familiar foods or flavors. Here are a few examples: "New" vegetables can be added to pizza, spaghetti sauce, or lasagna. Iceberg lettuce can be the vehicle for introducing dark (more nutritious) greens into salads. The proportion of dark greens to iceberg can be increased as taste acceptance changes. Learning to like tea without sugar is best achieved though progressively (and consistently!) lowering the sugar content, sometimes over as much as six months or a year.

The benefits of consciously shaping taste preferences are clear: When food tastes great *and* is good for you, making healthy choices is a lot easier!