

For Your Health – A Simple, Healthy Boost To Winter Comfort Foods

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ST. LOUIS - It's the time of year when we're drawn to comfort foods. As the days get shorter and hats and coats take center stage in the closet, many of us seek out dishes that warm us up.

While comfort foods vary, they commonly include casseroles, soups, stews and noodle dishes, among others. They're often familiar foods we may have grown up with or been introduced to at pivotal times in our lives. During the colder months, they can feel as much a part of the season as spiced apple cider and hot chocolate.

At the same time, many comfort foods aren't the healthiest of choices. They can be high in unhealthy fats, calories and refined grains, and have few nutritious vegetables. That doesn't mean we shouldn't have them, but it may be healthiest to keep some dishes on the occasional list, rather than the regular menu.

When we do enjoy some of our favorites, though, one easy way to give them a health boost while also keeping their familiar flavors is to use whole-grain noodles in place of standard refined-grain noodles. This can work well in stroganoffs, many casseroles, macaroni and cheese, lasagna, noodle soups, stir-fries with noodles, and pasta dishes.

While Americans are eating slightly more whole grains than before, most of us still fall short of recommendations that at least half of the grains we eat each day be whole grains. Switching out the types of noodles we use can be a simple way to work toward that goal.

And there can be real benefits to doing so. Whole grains are filled with fiber and many other important nutrients that get removed to make refined grains such as white flour and white rice. Studies show that eating more whole grains can lower the risk of weight gain, diabetes, heart disease and cancer – and may even help us live longer.

You can usually find whole-grain noodles right in the pasta aisle, and they come in an increasing number of varieties and shapes that fit perfectly into many traditional recipes. While these noodles are most commonly made from whole wheat, others are made from brown rice, quinoa and other grains.

Some whole-grain noodles can have a mild, nutty taste. So, experiment to see which you like best in which recipes, and you can start slowly. Try using half whole-grain noodles and half regular noodles at first. Then increase the amount of whole grain over time.

Winter can be very busy, between work, school, family and the holidays. However, it's important that we continue to look after our own health and well-being even as our schedules fill up. This can mean getting enough sleep, taking time to relax, getting out for regular walks or other exercise and trying to keep up with healthy eating. Adding whole grains to some of our recipes can be one quick and easy way to work toward that.

Enjoy the holidays – and have a healthy and happy New Year.

It's your health. Take control.