Food Service Professionals Learn How to Decrease Sodium Content while Maintaining Flavor

It is well known that too much sodium increases water retention resulting in increased blood pressure. Increased blood pressure is associated with heart disease. This health issue effects both adults and children, with average American sodium consumption being almost double the recommended amount for both groups.

The rising prevalence of children with high blood pressure has caused nutrition experts to look at children’s sodium consumption at school. Additionally, these statistics have spurred a need for training with a goal of improving meals served at school.

University of Illinois Extension SNAP-Ed Educator Kaitlyn Streitmatter provides professional development training to school food service staff in order to meet the USDA professional development standards and to address health concerns seen in today’s youth. One of the more popular training topics includes explaining why a reduction in sodium is important for children today and what food service staff can do to reduce sodium consumption at school.

Participants were taught to decrease sodium at mealtime while increasing flavor using herbs and spices and no added salt. They also learned about different cooking techniques such as roasting, browning, and marinating to add flavor. Incorporating fruits and vegetables such as celery, lemon, or peppers is also a way to add flavor without the salt.

Participants engaged in a hands-on activity to create their own seasoning packets made with only herbs and spices. At schools, blends such as fajita mix, chili seasoning, ranch seasoning and a general herb blend can be used during the cooking process or set out for students to use at a “flavor station.” This is a popular way to provide more flavor to school meals while decreasing sodium.

Nutrition standards in the National School Lunch Program and National School Breakfast Program require schools to stay below a specific target amount of sodium in school meals. With the increasing prevalence of pre-seasoned and pre-processed foods, lowering the amount of sodium while keeping flavor has become a challenge at many schools. Some of the most popular items served at lunch are also the highest in sodium including chicken nuggets, pizza, soups, and deli meat. It is important to understand how to create a meal with balance and to keep in mind taste preferences can change. After eating lower sodium food for a period of time the preference for salt decreases.

Herbs and spices are one option SNAP-Ed educator Kaitlyn Streitmatter gives to encourage school food service staff to use to help reduce sodium content while keeping flavor in the school meals. Kaitlyn provides professional development trainings to help schools meet USDA requirements and improve the health of students in Fulton, Mason, Peoria, and Tazewell Counties.