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The Health Advisor

By Brooke Bennett

These days there isn't a lot of time to sit down together as a family and eat a home-cooked meal. Many people eat on the run, dine out, or order in most days of the week. Restaurant food, especially fast food, tends to be higher in calories, fat, sugar, and salt and may be lacking important vitamins and minerals. Also, restaurant portions tend to be much larger than standard portions. With rates of obesity, diabetes, and heart disease on the rise in the Southwest Bronx, it is more important than ever to learn how to make healthier menu choices. What you eat can affect your body in many ways. Diet can influence weight, mental functioning, emotional well-being, energy levels and your future health. Here are some suggestions for making healthier menu choices:

- Drink water instead of soda! Soda has a lot of sugar and calories.
- Take the skin off your chicken before you eat it; the skin has a lot of fat.
- Ask for butter, salad dressing, and other rich sauces on the side to control the amount of saturated fat and cholesterol that you eat.
- Order foods that are grilled, roasted, broiled or baked, NOT fried or breaded. All fried foods, including chicken, potatoes, vegetables, and plantains, have a lot of unhealthy fat.
- Always order a green salad or vegetables with your meal. These foods are filling and very important for your health. If your meal comes with fries, chips, or plantains, ask for vegetables instead - this will help reduce calories and fat.
- Control portion sizes and save money by sharing a dish with a companion or taking part of your meal home.
- Plan ahead for special occasions, social events, and holiday celebrations. If you want to indulge in your favorite treats every once in a while, make room in your diet by choosing smaller portions and healthy, lower calorie foods for your other meals that day.

Remember, the customer comes first so don't be afraid to ask for what you want! Most restaurants will be happy to accommodate your needs. If more people in the community ask for healthier options the more likely restaurants will be to include such options on their menus.

For a list of restaurants in the south west Bronx that offer healthier options, please contact Geysil Arroyo (Bronx Healthy Hearts Restaurant Program) at 718-588-1235.

Brooke Bennett is a nutritionist with Bronx Health REACH, a program committed to eliminating racial and ethnic disparities in health outcomes in the southwest Bronx.