Resolve to improve family eating

quickly, yet taking stock of the family's eating habits and making even small changes in meals and snacks can improve your health, a Kansas State University nutrition specialist said.

Introducing changes gradually, rather than announcing a total makeover, may be more likely to earn a high-five from family members, however, said Sandy Procter, Kansas State University Research and Extension nutrition educator.

Changes might include introducing more fruits and vegetables, taming over-sized portions, or serving foods that are lower in calories, fat and sodium, without sacrificing flavor, said Procter.

Procter recommends adding new foods or recipes without calling attention to them. She explained a child will typically model a parent's behavior. If a child sees a parent enjoying any food, he or she will usually follow suit.

If a child turns up his or her nose when a new food is served, parents are encouraged to let the snub pass without a fuss and to reintroduce the new food in a different form later. A child who snubs a glass of vegetable juice may not

spaghetti sauce or a Sloppy Joe sandwich mix, Procter said.

vegetables often are happy to snack on fresh, cut vegetables with a low-calorie, low-fat dip, she said. Making sure that healthy foods such as fruits, vegetables, whole grain cereals, crackers or bread and low-fat dairy products are available can make choosing them as a snack more likely.

Easing the family away from foods that are high in calories, fat and sodium will take some time and tact, said Procter, who recommended 100-calorie snack packs to help children (and others in the family) learn to feel more comfortable with a recommended portion. The snack packs can be purchased or packaged at home using products from larger packages bought at a reduced price.

It also can reduce the temptation to eat chips or cookies directly out of the bag without regard to serving size, she said.

Making time to gather the family for meals and snacks rather than eating on the run, grazing or while watching television can improve nutrition and health, and also offer plus for families.

New Year's resolutions can fade realize it is being re-introduced in stability and encouragement for family members," Procter said.

> When a child knows he or she Also, children who shun cooked can count on regular meals, parents may note an increase in positive interaction with others and participation in school or preschool classes and family activities, and a decrease in negative, or anti-social behaviors, the nutrition specialist said.

> > Infants and toddlers sitting at the family table who listen in to family conversations can have a head start on building vocabulary and literacy skills, she said.

Getting the family together isn't always easy, said Procter, who noted that if scheduling prevents sharing an evening meal, making a point to eat breakfast together or share meals on weekends when more time is available, can help to encourage healthy meals - and relationships.

Using a slow-cooker, or cooking larger quantities and using leftovers can alleviate pressure in getting a meal together, Procter said. And, inviting children into the kitchen to learn about food, food safety, nutrition and health and basic cooking skills can be a

Children who learn about food typically make better eating choices at home or away, she said.

'Start gradually, and make it fun," said Procter, who noted that a healthy family meal does not have to be elaborate.

"Do, however, try to eat a variety of seasonal foods to take full advantage of health-promoting vitamins, minerals, and other compounds, including ... cancer-preventing antioxidants such foods offer," Procter said.

"Food prepared and eaten at home also is usually lower in calories, fat and sodium," said Procter, who said that eating more meals at home often can help trim the waistline and the food budget.

Information about managing family meals successfully is available at county and district K-State Research and Extension offices and online at: www.ksre.ksu.edu, www.ksre.ksu.edu/humannutrition, www.ksre.ksu.edu/foodsafety and www.rrc.ksu.edu.

Beginning cooks may especially enjoy Month of Menus and family-friendly recipes that are part of Extension's Kids a Cookin' series available on the Extension Web sites

Wood ash makes a chancy fertilizer here

For generations untold, gar- tested first, to determine the deners have been adding ashes need for changing pH or adding to their vegetable plots as a fertilizer and soil amendment. For them, it's been a second use for the wood burned in cooking and staying warm.

But, these recyclers haven't been worldwide. In some regions, continued ash disposal can make soil unfit for crops.

"Kansas can be one of those regions. You need certain conditions for incorporating ashes to work well, and Kansas soils don't necessarily have them," said Jake Weber, horticulturist with Kansas State University Research and Extension.

Adding ashes works best, he said, where the soil's levels of phosphate and potash are in low range. The soil also should be acidic enough to need a higher pH - i.e., be more alkaline.

"That's much more likely in the northeastern United States than in the limestone-rich High Plains," Weber said. "To avoid problems, Plains residents should have their garden's soil

nutrients."

The horticulturist provided additional cautions for Kansans who feel compelled to recycle:

• Try to maintain a margin of safety by limiting your annual application rate to no more than 5 pounds of wood ash per 1,000 square feet.

• Stop wood ash applications when the soil's pH reaches 7 or when its phosphate and potash levels climb into the very high

• Do your homework. In addition to such landscape plants as hydrangea, heather and azalea, many vegetables and fruits prefer slightly acidic soil - the opposite of what ashes create.

Weber said Colorado Extension has a good list of plants and their preferred pH levels. Links to the list's groupings of houseplants, woody ornamentals, vegetables and fruits are available on-line at www.coopext. colostate.edu/TRA/PLANTS/ acidlove.html.

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