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THE GREAT PANTRY OVERHAUL



By Jackie Keller

Why wait until spring to clean out your kitchen? Looking at a pantry full of ingredients can be overwhelming, especially at this time of year. Starting off the new year with a fresh supply of nutritious fare is a great idea if you're looking to follow a healthy eating regimen. Here are some guidelines to help you evaluate what you already have and determine what foods you should keep on hand for the optimal diet.

First, a primer in label reading. The ingredient label lists the ingredients in descending order by weight. Note that sweeteners come under many different names, most commonly brown sugar, white sugar, corn syrup, high fructose corn sweetener, maltodextrin, dextrose or any other item that ends in "ose." Be aware that some nutritional claims are also very carefully regulated. Here is an example: A "lite" label means the product contains at least 1/3 less calories or 50 percent less fat calories than its regular counterpart. "High" means that it contains 20 percent or more of that nutrient's recommended Daily Value, which is based on a 2000 or 2500 calorie diet.

For a well-stocked pantry, you'll need to have some staples on hand. But first, take a few minutes to think through your weekly menus. Do you plan your meals ahead of time? If not, jot

down what you generally eat for breakfast, lunch, dinner and snacks. If possible, set up a menu plan for the week, incorporating the types of dishes that you generally enjoy preparing and eating. This will help determine the items that you might want to have on hand.

The chart to the right, lists standard supplies that have good shelf stability and can be specifically used for unplanned guests, emergencies and other situations.

You will certainly have your own additions to these lists, but these items will help you get started on upgrading your pantry.

Remember to rotate items regularly. If you can't remember when you bought something, it may be too old to use. A good rule of thumb is to get rid of canned items that are more than a year old. Grains need to be stored in a cool and dry place, such as your pantry. Make sure your pantry is not humid, as humidity invites insects, mold and speeds deterioration. Consider donating unneeded food to the local food bank. They will know whether or not it's still edible. Taking stock of your pantry annually is a great idea!

Your refrigerator needs to be cleaned out once a week, with items rotated. Clean with a weak solution (1/2 teaspoon of bicarbonate soda per cup of water). Do not use detergent or bleach.

Some basic storage rules for perishables: Store whole eggs in their original carton on the bottom shelf of the refrigerator, towards the back. This is generally the coldest part of the refrigerator. Store meats and cheeses away from fresh fruits and vegetables because they require colder temperatures and less humidity. Keep tomatoes, onions, bananas and potatoes in your pantry, not in your refrigerator, separated from each other. Tomatoes and bananas give off ethylene gas, which ripens other produce stored near them. When refrigerated, the natural sugars in onions and potatoes change chemical composition, which can lead to taste degradation and textural changes.

So, now that you have a well-equipped kitchen, preparing healthy food is not such a challenge or chore. Take another look at your sample meal plan. Do you have the food you need to cook a week's worth of healthy meals?

Another plus, home cooking can be significantly less expensive than eating out or buying pre-prepared meals. So, for healthier meals and to save some money, start cooking! ★

Jackie Keller is the Founding Director of NutriFit, L.L.C., a licensed and certified wellness coach and nutrition educator and a Le Cordon Bleu-trained culinary expert. She also is the author of *Body After Baby: The Simple 30-Day Plan to Lose Your Baby Weight Fast* (Avery/Penguin Group; May 2007) and *Cooking, Eating & Living Well*, a cookbook and guide to nutrition-related lifestyle change. To learn more, visit nutrifit.org.

PANTRY STAPLES

- Low sodium broth in boxes, cubes or cans;
- Low sodium canned beans
- Staple canned vegetables like tomatoes, peas, beets, corn or olives;
- Water-packed seafood, such as tuna and salmon, canned or in foil pouches;
- Whole wheat pasta in at least two different shapes and sizes;
- Brown and wild rice;
- Whole-wheat couscous and quinoa;
- Condiments like mustard, low fat or fat-free mayonnaise, relish, hot sauce and ketchup;
- Reduced sodium tamari (soy sauce) and Worcestershire sauce;
- Extra virgin olive oil and olive oil spray;
- Canola or grapeseed oil and canola oil spray;
- Two different vinegars: Balsamic and one other, either apple cider or white wine;
- Whole-wheat flour;
- Baking powder and baking soda;
- Sea salt and black pepper;
- Paprika;
- Cinnamon;
- Salt-free spice blends (like NutriFit blends);
- Vanilla extract;
- Old-fashioned oats;
- Whole grain, high fiber, low fat dry cereals;
- Wheat germ;
- Whole flaxseed (ground flaxseed needs to be refrigerated);
- Cornstarch;
- Natural sugar, honey and molasses;
- Dark chocolate;
- Unsweetened baking cocoa.

PERISHABLE GOODS FOR ONGOING USE

(Store in refrigerator or freezer.)

- Whole-wheat sandwich bread and whole-wheat pita bread;
- Trans fat-free margarine or spread;
- Low fat or reduced fat hard cheeses — like cheddar, Swiss and Monterey Jack;
- Low fat or fat-free soft cheeses — like cottage cheese and cream cheese;
- Low fat or fat-free yogurt;
- Low fat or fat-free milk;
- Eggs;
- Fresh fruit;
- Fresh vegetables.