

Planning helps families eat well even in busy seasons

It's hard to serve healthy, nutritious meals to kids belted in the backseat as you speed from an after-school practice for one kid to a 6 p.m. recreational practice for another.

The overwhelming temptation is to zip through a drive-thru, but with a little forethought, the drive-thru meal can be replaced with a healthier choice.

Åsa House, a dietician at St. Joseph Medical Center in Towson, and a busy mom herself, says planning and a good cooler are the keys to eating well on the go.

The planning starts while grocery shopping. Look for healthy items in handy packages – she loves those 100-calorie snack packs that provide some fun without piling on the pounds. Couple those with plenty of fresh fruit, and you've got snacks to go.

When it comes to dinner, she understands the drive-thru temptations, “but there are other choices,” she said.

She recommends Subway, which offers a healthy menu with subs low in fat. “But you've got to get out of the car,” she says with a laugh.

Supermarkets also offer an alternative to fast food, with hot food bars and salad bars.

A fresh loaf of bread and a salad bar salad make a quick meal. Top a salad with a little cottage cheese for protein. Buy a rotisserie chicken, and pull pieces of chicken off it for a heartier salad. Mrs. House knows that's a bit messy to try and do in a car, but again, planning ahead can have those chicken strips ready to go in a plastic baggie in the cooler. Whip up some chicken salad or tuna salad and dump it in an easy-to-eat pita pocket.

Pita pockets and wraps, said Mrs. House, “are great things to pack with whatever you have at home.”

One benefit of eating on the run, she adds with a laugh, is that her picky 2-year-old

“tends to eat better in his car seat because he has nothing else to do.”

Avoid sports drinks, which add unnecessary sugar. “Marathon runners are the only ones who need it regularly,” Mrs. House said. “Water is fine.”

When finally arriving home, the thought of scrambling to make dinner isn’t so intimidating if everything is on hand for a quick meal. Avoid ready-made dinners, which are high in sodium and have lots of sugar and trans fats, Mrs. House said.

Instead she suggests fish such as salmon, which takes just a few minutes to cook and the leftovers can fill a wrap. A jar of pasta sauce coupled with a bit of ground turkey also makes an easy dinner.

If reaching for a frozen dinner, make sure it’s a homemade one. “I try to cook when I have time and freeze portions,” Mrs. House said.

Finally, think breakfast for dinner. Scramble some eggs, perfect your pancakes, whip up some waffles.

“We love breakfast for dinner,” Mrs. House said.

Then, when the kids win the big game – or when they don’t – you can treat them to fast food without feeling guilty.